

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Conflict 1961-1975

Personal Experience

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DONALD E CURRY

Interviewed

by

Darlene Pavlock

on

December 10, 1991

DONALD E. CURRY

Donald E. Curry was born in Youngstown, Ohio December 22, 1946 to Donald E. and Jeanette A. Curry. His father's position in government service had the family moving the first five years of his life. Thereafter, they returned to the area and settled in Austintown Township, where Don resides today. He traveled extensively through his childhood.

After graduating from Austintown Fitch High School, Don enrolled in John Carroll University, obtaining his Bachelor of Arts Degree Summa Cum Laude in 1969. He has earned two degrees from Youngstown State University, Bachelor of Science Degree in 1976 and Masters in Business Administration in 1981. Don was active in ROTC at John Carroll University. His college affiliations include Phi Alpha Theta, Phi Alpha Sigma, Sigma Phi Alpha.

After graduation from John Carroll he attended officers' training at Fort Benning, Georgia and trained soldiers there for a year and a half before being sent to Vietnam. He arrived in Vietnam July 4, 1971 and was attached to the 1st Air Cavalry, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry at Bien Hoa. At the end of 1971 he moved to the Bear Cat area as security for Saigon. Because of his training and speaking both Vietnamese and French, Don was Battalion Civil Affairs Officer. He spent most of his time as liaison between the U.S. forces, other foreign units and the Vietnamese troops. He also worked with training, intelligence and interrogation. In April 1972 his tour ended and he was sent to Fort Hood, Texas to complete his remaining year and a half of active duty. He received the Bronze Star and the Combat Infantry Badge.

Don has been employed with the State of Ohio, Bureau of Employment Services since 1976. He enjoys reading, watching old movies, and collects military memorabilia. He is compiling data to write a book on Vietnam.

P This is an interview with Donald E. Curry for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by Darlene Pavlock, on December 10, 1991 at the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services on South Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, at 5:00 p.m.

Where were you born and raised?

C I am a Youngstown native, born and raised in Youngstown. My father was with the government, so I spent about five years moving city to city for a year each, and then we moved back to the Youngstown-Warren area in 1955.

P You have been here ever since?

C: I have been here ever since, with time out for college and the Army.

P Tell me a little bit about your growing-up years.

C It was a typical, all-American, middle-class family.

P What side of town did you live at?

C In Austintown. My family has been there thirty-six years this month.

P But you lived in this area all your life?

C Right. When I was born, we were out in what is now Boardman and then we wound up a few years after that going to the Boston area, then the Cleveland area, and then Warren, and then Youngstown.

P: You were basically a baby then, rather than a child?

C Right. I spent Kindergarten, first grade, second grade and the third grade all in different schools.

P Oh, my. Now as you were growing up and your family was together, did you take summer vacations very much?

C Yes.

P Did you? Where did you go?

C The biggest one I remember was when I graduated from eighth grade, we went to Washington, D.C. for a week. A lot of times, usually they were weekend-types of vacations, depending on when my father could get off work. That was the hard part, him

getting time off from work

P What high school did you attend?

C Austintown Fitch, class of 1965

P Then you went on to college after that?

C. Right

P What was high school and college like?

C: High school was so, so I enjoyed college probably too much I was on the Dean's list my freshmen year, and probation by my senior year

P You were involved in the ROTC program?

C Yes

P At John Carroll?

C At John Carroll University in Cleveland.

P Where did you do your basic training for that?

C Fort Benning, Georgia Benning school for boys

P What year did you start that?

C December of 1969

P Tell me about your basic training What was it like?

C Well, officers' basic training is slightly different because they assumed that we got most of the rudiments of soldiering done beforehand, knowing how to march, how to set up So we went into what you would call trade training, how to lead troops, how to train troops, how to handle combat and so on That was nine or ten weeks back then I think it is closer to four months now Then it was roughly ninety days The phrase "ninety day wonders" still holds

P That was for officers' training?

C. Right

- P When you were finished, did you go back to school to finish up school and graduate?
- C No, that was after I graduated I graduated in 1969 I then went on active duty I got a draft notice a week after I got my orders for active duty
- P When you finished your officers' training at Fort Benning, where did you go from there?
- C Originally, I was supposed to go to the 82nd Airborne, but I went over a cliff in Ranger training and I tore my back up. So after I got off medical leave, I was reassigned to Fort Benning, with what they call Cadre I was Executive Officer for a five hundred-man training company, they were all NCO's They were the people who trained the soldiers there. I spent about a year and a half there, running company training and learning myself
- P Were you a second lieutenant?
- C: I was a second lieutenant starting out and I was a first lieutenant a year later
- P That is when you got your orders for Vietnam?
- C That is when I went to Vietnam We landed there on the 4th of July, 1971
- P Where were you stationed there?
- C I was stationed with the 1st Air Cavalry Our headquarters area was in Bien Hoa, which was one of the major cities It is roughly thirty or forty miles from Saigon, which is the capitol Our operational area was basically in what they call the 3rd Corps, the 3rd military region, Vietnam I was in Vietnam from July 4, 1971 to April 27 or 29, 1972 This is when the war was supposedly winding down, but unfortunately, there was still a lot of active combat going on I was with the 1st Air Cavalry, the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry At the end of 1971, we moved to the Bear Cat area as part of the security for Saigon in the headquarters there.
- P What was a typical day like?
- C My assignments are unusual I was not the typical officer I was an infantry officer, but I was a staff officer I was the battalion S-5 which is civil affairs officer because I spoke Vietnamese and French I had gone through training to be an advisor and all I spent most of my time doing liaison work with other units of the brigade, other foreign units-- Australians, Koreans, Thai's, and working with the Vietnamese I spent more time working with Vietnamese troops than I did with American troops
- P What did you do with them?

C I was involved in helping train them. They were what they called the "rough pups"-- the regional and popular forces. The closest equivalent would be National Guard types. They were people who were trained to defend basically their home areas and villages. So they are only slightly military to say the least. Basically, they were peasants and farmers who were given self defense training so they could protect themselves from the enemy. Sometimes the Viet Cong, sometimes the North Vietnamese Army. I was also the assistant S-2 which was intelligence. So I worked with Vietnamese in coordinating operations and psychological warfare interrogations, things like that.

P Did you interrogate a person?

C Occasionally. I generally just scared the hell out of them just by showing up since I was probably about 100 pounds larger than the average Vietnamese. From all the stories they heard about Americans they thought that we would eat them.

P Really? That was one of the stories? What were some other stories?

C Strange. We would do things like dropping psychological warfare leaflets. We found most of them were used as toilet paper more than anything else. They always liked to have one just in case so they could surrender and get a free rest camp for awhile. One time I dropped a bunch of leaflets on our own camp just for the hell of it.

P What kind of leaflets?

C Psychological warfare basically saying, "It is a good idea to surrender, you have got it miserable, etc , etc "

P It was written in Vietnamese?

C Right

P How would you drop these? From the air?

C From an airplane. We just threw them out the window.

P Did most of the people read them? Could they read?

C The literacy was quite high, actually. Most of the people we would be dropping them out to were not really interested. They were serious about the war more so than we were. It was a strange operation because we called it "firebase of the month club". We would move in, take an area, which meant generally we had to kill people and lose some ourselves, then a month later we would leave, which was absolute insanity, but that is the way the plan was.

P So you would just go from one place to another?

C Right We did that for about six or eight months Then we settled in Bear Cat

P What type of living conditions did you have there?

C I remember when we built the firebase in Bear Cat I spent a week living in a Conex Container, which is but an eight foot square steel shipping container We used to make what we called "dog houses", which is a couple sections of steel-covered half arcs, placed on top of ammo boxes that have been sandbagged. That was when we were living good. Out in the field, you would wrap yourself up in a poncho. Now, when I worked with the Vietnamese, we were talking about houses and all, there was nothing in the way of sanitary facilities, showers with hot running water But at least it was in out of the rain

P What type of a dwelling was it?

C Most of them were what you would call shacks around here The higher up the scale, the better the housing The typical peasant house was really a wood or a bamboo frame which was thatched with leaves--it was a bamboo hut like you would see on Gilligan's Island--all the way up to stucco and brick mansions like you would see in the south, for ones who got them from the French or who had money

P Did you get to live in any of those?

C Occasionally

P Did you? Gee What did you eat? In the field you ate rations

C The typical C-rations, which were a meal in a can I stuck to things like meatballs and beans and franks, things you could eat cold Later on, they had rations which were freeze-dried, dehydrated, which basically, it looked like dog food. You would mix it with water It was not too bad I ate well when I worked for the Vietnamese There was lots of rice which, surprisingly, I still love They also had fresh fruits, vegetables, meat Beef was a delicacy over there Most of their meat would be like fish, chicken, occasionally pork. Beef was very, very rare. Vietnamese are seen as very similar to Chinese, so there was lots of rice, lots of vegetables and a little bit of meat One of the things the French introduced to Vietnam was baking, so usually you could have some delicious French bread with it But the Vietnamese that I was working with would be middle-class and upper-class The typical Vietnamese peasant would have rice three times a day and if you are lucky, a little bit of meat and vegetables for supper.

The typical Vietnamese peasant--the income back then, per capita was about one hundred and twenty-five dollars a year. I was responsible for what we called the Kid Carson Scouts, which were Vietnamese who worked for the U S Army A lot of them

were former Viet Cong, former NVA soldiers that had seen the light. Some were mercenaries. We paid them an equivalent of about twenty-five dollars a month or so, plus benefits. Also, for the privilege of being allowed to shoot their countrymen, they could live two or three times as well as the typical farmer.

P So it was a real incentive for them?

C Very much so. It was ridiculous when you saw our standard of living contrasted to theirs. Like I said, one hundred and twenty-five dollars a year was their typical income. We would have G.I.'s blowing that much on wine, women, and song wondering, "What are these people upset about?" It was a very poor country but very nice people. Most of them, all they really wanted to do was just be left alone. They did not care who was in charge. "Just leave us alone, let us raise our family, raise our farm," and everything else. I was lucky that I worked with the real Vietnamese, not the ones that were in the cities.

P Now, were you close to any major cities?

C Bien Hoa was a "major city." What they consider a city is not what we would consider a city, but it had the typical. It would have the restaurants, the stores, the markets, the hospitals, things like that. Their city would be what we would consider a very small town. Something like Girard or Niles would be a big city there. Saigon was a major city, by any standards. It was very westernized. The French influence was very prevalent there. In contrast to there, you would walk a few streets down and you are in the slums where they got open garbage pits and sewers and everything else. So in utter contrast-- there was a lot of wealth, a lot of poverty.

P Did you enjoy your time there?

C Most of it, honestly, yes. I enjoyed working with the Vietnamese. Most of the people I worked with, a lot of them came out of North Vietnam in the 1950's after the first war and this was home now. They were determined not to be pushed anymore. So most of them were ready to die in place rather than to retreat again. They were fighting for their homes. They were serious about it. Vietnam, the country itself, until late in the war years, did not have a draft or anything. Like the American draft, if you had a wealthy family or connections, you could avoid the draft. So generally, the Vietnamese who did the fighting were for the most part-- like the Americans-- were lower class, maybe middle-class. There were very few upper-class. The Vietnamese had been fighting for centuries. The last war that most people think of is they fought the Japanese in World War II, then the French after that, and then either they were fighting Americans or fighting North Vietnamese from about 1955 on. I worked with people who had been fighting literally, almost all their whole lives. I have worked with people who had been fighting for twenty or thirty years.

P How did they keep up their spirits up?

C It was sheer survival. They were just living day to day, surviving, hoping things would be better for their children. Because regardless of how Vietnam came out, we bought them time. We probably gave them at least another ten years. The way things would have been without us, we gave them an extra ten years

P That is really interesting I never realized that

C Then, we abandoned them Everything I have ever seen and read and talked about indicates that for the most part, the initial phases of the war in Vietnam that we were involved in was almost a civil war, where it was the Viet Cong against the Vietnamese government and it was only after about 1964 So when the U.S started adding troops to Vietnam, then the North Vietnamese started coming in. So basically, it was almost like a poker game We raised, we would see the ante, we raised It was back and forth It got almost stupid with national pride. After the 1968, 1969 TET operation, the Viet Cong had almost been wiped out of existence and became mainly a North Vietnamese operation The troops we fought against most of the time in our operation was the 274th Viet Cong Regiment However, it was later designated as North Vietnamese Most of it was North Vietnamese troops that had come down and joined Supposedly, this was still a civil war, just like we were just there to help the Vietnamese

There has always been controversy about the effectiveness of the Vietnamese fighting men and women I remember one woman, she had lost her family and all she lived for was revenge. When I met her, she was probably in her early 30's and had killed at least fifty Viet Cong or NVA herself and wanted more The people I worked with were motivated They were fighting for their homes. The ones I have worked with were serious the regional forces, the professional forces The other people I worked with were with the provincial reconnaissance units, which were an outgrowth of some of the special forces They were extremely dangerous people They were very hard core The Vietnamese that I worked with were good I have heard comments on how most of the Vietnamese troops were not worth a damn I do not know from personal experience, but all I can think is after you have been fighting for ten, fifteen, or twenty years, you are little tired of listening to some guy that is coming in for a year or so, telling you how to fight a war One of my Vietnamese NCO's had been an officer in the North Vietnamese Army He had been fighting the French first He had been fighting for over twenty years himself He was still in his 30's He had been fighting ever since he was a teenager

P That is amazing That is really amazing.

C A lot of people I have worked with-- that is all their families can remember-- war

P What major events stand out in your mind during this time?

C The biggest single thing I can remember, really, was the Easter Offensive of 1972, which never got that much publicity, but it was almost a reverse of the TET 1968. That was a surprise. The Easter Offensive of 1972, we knew it was coming, we captured people. It was basically a massacre for the North Vietnamese, and the ARVN's fought well. That was the biggest thing I remember, shooting holes in tanks and things like that. But the whole tour-- I was lucky. I saw some combat, but not as much as the line troops. I was lucky in that I was able to work with Vietnamese. I saw a lot more of their country. The typical American saw very, very little of the country, except for maybe the bars and the warehouses. Most of them did not speak the language. It would be like saying, "Las Vegas is typical America." I got a lot better feel for the country than most Americans did and I feel lucky in that way.

P How did you travel throughout the country?

C Most of the time by jeep and helicopter.

P Really? You would take a trip on a daily basis or weekly basis?

C Well, I had my own jeep assigned to me while I was doing liaison. Towards the end of my tour, I was doing courier duty also. I had a section of four gun jeeps, plus other transport. A lot of times we went from one place to another. Most of the time we traveled by jeep more than anything else.

P You were not afraid of land mines or ambushes or anything like that?

C No. Honestly, I figured, when my time was up, it was up. Because regardless, we were there when the war was supposed to be winding down, but if I remember correctly, in my battalion we had like twenty-one officers. I think about fourteen got wounded. It was still dangerous there. Then, again, we lost more people to accidents and disease than to anything else.

P Gee, you do not really think about that. That is a different perspective.

C Very much.

P When you were there, you probably carried images of home and your former civilian life with you. What were those images?

C The biggest thing I remember was the holiday, especially, Christmas. The Vietnamese, like any other country, they are very much into home and family and holidays. Their TET is the major holiday. It is the lunar new year and that is pretty much Christmas and New Year's rolled into one for them. They have other holidays also. For us, the holidays are always what you remember, because that is what you remembered about home more.

than anything else. At Thanksgiving, they are hauling containers of turkey and cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes and gravy out to troops in the field. At Christmas, guys are setting up Christmas trees in bunkers and everything. At New Years, they are firing flares off, things like that. The 4th of July, we celebrated.

The first night I was in Vietnam, I heard what I thought was thunder. It turned out to be enemy mortar fire celebrating the 4th of July for us. You tend to remember the holidays because you figure by celebrating them there and your family and friends are celebrating them at home, there is some bridge there. Those are the things that you remember more than anything else. You remember things like in-country R & R (rest & relaxation). They had a French beach resort, and one side of the beach was used by Americans, one side by the bad guys, and we waved to each other. We ignored each other. "Okay, I will shoot you tomorrow, but today, I am relaxing."

P. Really?

C. Oh, yes. It was strange. Then, again, there was always the French, a lovely bunch of people I always thought. Michelin Rubber, one reason I will never own Michelin tires is they own huge rubber plantations that they paid bribes and taxes to both sides to be let alone. So in our area, the rubber plantations were usually sanctuaries for the bad guys and we were not allowed to go in there.

It was a strange war. One day you would be seeing New York fashion shows or Sammy Davis junior, or Bob Hope, that type of thing, and then a couple days later, you would be walking through what had been left of a village or something like that. It was schizoid. The weather, you got used to it as much as you could after awhile, but it was generally hot and humid, oppressive. The monsoons, you would have a week or two of freezing rains. You could not get warm, you could not get dry, things like that. You would be living in the little sandbag huddle and then you would go down the street and you would see these absolutely beautiful temples and pagodas and see the artwork. It was such utter contrast. You would fly over these absolutely beautiful landscapes.

Vietnam is very much like the United States. Most of the area we worked in, I would say, the landscape was more like Mill Creek Park than a jungle. It was forest, not heavy forest either, but some areas were heavy jungle where you did not know if it was day or night. You could not see, others were just forest. Most of the areas that we worked in were what you would call forest, rather than jungle. It was almost like a typical park.

P. You could maneuver through them?

C. Right. You would fly over them and notice the outlines where, say, the French forts had overgrown and stuff, just amazing. But it was beautiful country, just the scenery, the flowers, the trees, the animals, a lot of the old buildings, the temples. They were nice people, friendly, if you tried to know them and go by their rules. For the most part, we did not. Undoubtedly, the American Syndrome was alive and well in Vietnam. God, was

it alive and well. I know back in the late 1960's, early 1970's, the Army, to some extent, reflected problems like race and drugs. We were probably better off than most of the country at the time, because there were only two colors in Vietnam. Green and Red. Green uniforms and red blood. So I honestly did not see much in the way of racial conflict. I saw a lot more conflict between the guys who would drink and the guys who used marijuana. It was them against every one of you as the hard drugs. Strange.

P Was there a lot of structure with your dress and your uniforms?

C Most of us looked like a bunch of bandits. I was a little bit different. Since I had a regular assignment, I was able to wear a more normal-type uniform. In the field, generally, most of the missions lasted two or three days. After that, you would dump uniforms and laundry so no one ever had a uniform that was his own. In the rear, I was able to have most of my own. We had regulation. Out in the field it was, "be as comfortable as possible." So we looked like a bunch of bandits, for the most part.

P The images that you brought of home with the holidays and all that, were there other ones that you thought of along the way that you zeroed in more, anything that you thought maybe would not change and when you got home did change?

C It is hard to say. A lot of it changed somewhat beforehand because the training I went through. I thought I knew what to expect in Vietnam, but it was a lot worse than what I had expected and trained for. So afterward, I was a lot more cautious, a lot more paranoid, a lot harder to get along with, a lot more calloused. Our basic job was to kill people. That is what we did. That is what we were trained for. Unfortunately, we did it very well. The Vietnamese memorial commemorates fifty or sixty thousand men and women who died for the United States. The South Vietnamese lost about two hundred fifty thousand. North Vietnam, as many as one million. People do not realize the cost. You try not to remember, but you do not forget the people you killed. We wiped out our generation there. The average age of the American soldier and the Vietnamese soldier on both sides was about nineteen. They were young. They are always going to be nineteen.

P That was the North Vietnamese soldier? The professional soldier?

C The typical North Vietnamese soldier was like ours. He was a nineteen-year-old draftee who was offered the congratulations of "you are going to south Vietnam."

P Which was entirely different from the children and the guerrillas, or the gooks, as they called them?

C Right. Most of the ones that we played with were as good as our own. The 1st Air Cavalry division was probably the best line unit in Vietnam. Most of the North Vietnamese we fought with I thought were our equals, at least, in some cases, better.

They had more experience. The only reason we overcame in most cases was that we were able to move faster, we had more firepower and more supplies. It was a strange war. Had it come down to the individual soldier so much as national will, the North Vietnamese had more will to win, which is one of their phrases, "Will to win". That is what this country did not have. That is why we won the war, but gave up. When you kill one million people, compared to fifty thousand, there is no way you lost, but when you say, "Okay, we are going home and desert the south Vietnamese," like we did.

It was a strange war. It is never really going to be settled because there are thousands of Vietnam Veterans who never forget. We still had a couple thousand MIA's. The North Vietnamese have two or three hundred thousand, who are still missing in action. Not being given a proper burial, not being brought home is pretty much dooming them to wander in limbo for eternity. We did not help that country that much, except buying them time. We gave them an extra ten years.

P What changed significantly when you returned home?

C Probably, I would say, I was definitely not as friendly or as outgoing. I was acting paranoid, because in Vietnam there were never really any front lines. You never knew when something could happen. There were no safe areas. With the work I was doing with the Kit Carson Scouts, the Vietnamese, I was worth, supposedly \$2,500 for my head, which is about twenty years pay to a typical Vietnamese.

P They had a bounty on you? Really?

C Yes.

P Did you establish friendships there?

C Oh, yes. I keep wondering what happened to a lot of the people I knew. My chief interpreter, we called him Long Ben--one of the major cities was called Long Bin and his name happened to be Ben. He was very tall for a Vietnamese, I would say close to six feet. He had fought against the Japanese, against the French. He spoke about seven or eight languages. He spoke better English than most of our troops. As an indicator in my battalion, counting myself, there were only three or four officer's who spoke Vietnamese and then, maybe a couple NCO's, so most of the troops that were there had no idea. It was a completely foreign country to them. They had no idea of what was going on. No conception. They looked down on the people. I know one of the things that always amazed me and disappointed me was the amount of bigotry and racism I saw on the part of minority American troops, Blacks and Hispanics, supposedly the oppressed in the U.S., they would be calling Vietnamese, "slopes" and "dinks", cussing them out because they could not speak English, and mistreating them-- things like that. I prefer to remember the good. I remember the people I know that were good people. The fact that I was lucky enough to have a job that I could do something in, and accomplish

something

P Do you think about it today?

C Yes and no. I left active duty in 1973 and I stayed in the reserves a few years, got out of it, because I was going to graduate school. I worked full-time, there was just no way I could keep up with everything. So in 1985 or so, I finally took a discharge. I was a Captain up for Major then, but I thought I had had Vietnam behind me, for years, like I basically forgot about it. A lot of it started one day when they put up the Vietnam Veterans Memorial the beginning of 1982 or 1983. Every time you turned around there would be something that started reminding me, and I would be going back and forth. I started to get flashbacks. Eventually it was what PTSD. I thought I was going crazy, because I had no idea what was going on. That is when I got involved with some of the veterans. Once you know you are not crazy, you are normal for a Vietnam Veteran. Ever since then, I figured that there is no way I can completely forget it. It is a part of my life, for better or for worse. I collect Vietnam military [memorabilia] and I am working on some articles, and I probably mentioned the book. So basically, I have to accept it. The question is, am I going to let Vietnam control me, or am I going to control it?

I was lucky, a lot luckier than many of the veterans. I was older. I was twenty-four. I turned twenty-five in Vietnam, so I was several years older than the average Vietnam Veteran. I had had a college degree and I had a lot more training. So I was a little better prepared for it. Also, I did not see as much combat as some of the guys did. I was able to come back and get a pretty decent job going with my life. A lot of guys, you take a nineteen-year-old kid that is a squad leader, or a platoon sergeant, even. He has won a bunch of medals, he has had the most important job in the world, literally, life and death. If he makes the wrong decision, someone dies. If he makes the right decision, someone dies. You come back and you tell this kid, "Well, maybe I can get you a job at McDonald's flipping hamburgers." They cannot fit in.

The Vietnam veterans were not treated like the veterans from World War II or Korea. World War II, the benefits they had would allow a veteran to go to school and still live. With us, the way the G.I. bill worked, if you did not have a job, you really couldn't afford to go to school on what they paid. I figured out that what I got, I think the most I got was a very little three hundred dollars a month, so by the time you got done paying your tuition and books and everything else, it worked out that you were getting like fifty cents an hour. There is simply no way someone could live on three hundred dollars a month. So an awful lot of veterans who would like to use the G.I. bill were too busy working to use it. The typical Vietnam Vet went into a factory job, manufacturing, construction, something like that. They are the ones who have been hurt the most because they lost that time when they were in the service. For years, they were looked down on; drug addicts, baby-killers, fruitcakes, so and so. There is still, an awful lot of vets out there that are probably not going to fit into society.

Then again, most of us have got on with our lives and Vietnam is just part of the history. Some got scars, some physical, some mental. Vietnam is just part of your

personal history, just like birthdays, births, deaths, whatever. It is just a matter of control. Do you control Vietnam or does it control you? It has to do with making peace with yourself and the history.

P: How did home change, and your friends and family change, when you came back?

C: It was not so much them as it was me. I was not the same person.

P: Did you visualize them one way and you came back and everything was different?

C: They had not changed, I had changed. Things like, I still do not like sitting unless my back is to a wall or something like that. At night, I still cannot sleep unless my bedroom door is closed. For months, it was locked and I had a loaded weapon close by, because most of the work I did in combat. We worked at night. Night was when they came out to play. You remember things like that. Loud noises. For probably a year after I got back, I either had a gun on me or within a few inches, because "there were people out there trying to kill me." It is difficult to break habits like that. You jump at loud noises. I hit the ground. Some things stick with you. It is traumatic. Just like if you have ever been in an auto accident, you avoid going near the place you got hurt. Some things make a permanent imprint. It is a permanent history. Home did not change so much for me. Like I said, I was an officer and a gentleman, a college graduate, and again, several months after I came home to Youngstown, the best job I could find was back in Republic Steel as a laborer. So I experienced almost like, "Who wants to hire a Vietnam Veteran?"

P: You had all this education, you served your time, you were at a good age, and this is what you could get?

C: Right. So it is strange. I lost a lot of respect for the country and the government, the way they treated Vietnam Veterans. My own opinion is that most of the advances for Vietnam Veterans over the past couple decades are because of the Vets, not anyone else. Vietnam Vets took care of Vietnam Vets. It is only now that there is any recognition or any acknowledgment. A lot of us are abused by the publicity and the uproars, the parades given for the people in Desert Storm who did their bit. And then you have Panama and Grenada. They were wars, but they were only a weekend. In Vietnam, what a typical combat troop would have had compared to those, that has passed. You cannot forget Vietnam, but you cannot dwell there. Some veterans have totally withdrawn from society. Most of us are probably as well-adjusted as anyone, just that we have a peculiar bit of history and we do a few weird things. You would be amazed. I think probably half of all the Tabasco sauce in the county is sold to Vietnam Veterans because we used it so much in our meals to make them taste a little bit better.

P: So how did you adapt to most of the changes that you saw? What methods did you use?

- C Just day by day Like I said, I was fortunate that I had a family to go back to
- P Did you live at home with your folks when you came back?
- C I took about a thirty day leave I was still on active duty, so I was as home for a while I was wound I probably drove my folks crazy with my language, and my trying to get used to everything I went back on active duty for about another year and a half
- P Where did you go after Vietnam?
- C After I came back from Vietnam, I went down to Fort Hood, Texas, and spent most of my time there as a staff officer also
- P. What did you do down there?
- C I was just about an assistant to everything because I was a very senior first lieutenant My group. One of the pros of being a Vietnam officer is that they are promoted extremely fast When I was in training, we had a twenty-four-year-old major We had captains that were not old enough to vote We had lots of twenty-year-old captains, back then You could not vote until you were twenty-one It used to be that you would go from second lieutenant to first lieutenant in a year, first lieutenant to captain a year after that. They stopped that with the group just before mine So in other words, if I had started active duty about two weeks earlier, I would have been a captain when I left, instead of a first lieutenant So we were the senior first lieutenants of the Army Having been a combat veteran, I generally worked in a slot that a captain would have held I started out as a supply officer and when they got one of those, I became the battalion legal officer and an assistant adjutant, which is basically that I handled most of the administration for our battalion
- P You had men under you?
- C Yes I had anywhere from two to fifty, depending on which assignment I had When I started at Fort Benning, I had a five hundred man instructor company So I handled everything from a low of two to five hundred
- P How did Texas compare to Vietnam, climate-wise?
- C It was dry, where we were was Fort Hood There, it was warm, but it was dry There was very little humidity It was comfortable.
- P Did it seem a culture shock to come back with the people and the areas and views were different when you came back?

C Some. The few times that I was down there, I said I was a senior first lieutenant, I went past I think it was a colonel He said, "You must be just back from Vietnam " I said, "What?" "You did not salute " You do not salute in a war zone That is a good way to point someone out to a sniper or something So I had to get used to saluting, and I had to get used to being saluted. It was "Huh, oh, yeah!" One of those types of deals It was a cultural shock

P Back to military structure

C Yes. As if being an officer was not quite as an adjustment as it were being someone else But a lot of the guys, they had trouble adjusting from a combat environment to a Garrison environment where there is a lot of B S. and spit-shined boots and starched fatigues In Vietnam, it was, "Can you do the job?" Not, "Gee, you need a haircut," or "Gee, you do not have this straight," that type of thing It was adjustment. Just basically like an adult moving back in with his parents and having to live under the same rules as when he was a kid It was a big adjustment for the troops [For] Me, it was not so bad, because we would have been the ones who were making the rules One of the biggest adjustments was women. Because in a combat zone, about the only ones you saw were the American Red Cross volunteers It was like, "Gee, not everyone has black hair " The Vietnamese are little people. I was shocked I talked to a woman who is as tall as you are, the fashions and everything Over there, everyone dressed in fatigues

And just seeing all the vehicles, too, that was the biggest adjustment Because over there, most people are poor, so most people have a bicycle or they walk A status symbol was a moped or a scooter A car was what the very wealthy had You would see a bus with a couple hundred people hanging on it That would just be the traffic, all the noise and all the pollution I spent a week in Australia on R & R and I spent the first half hour turning on the air conditioning, flushing the toilet, and watching the shower Civilization is things like electricity and running water, hot showers, things that we just take for granted Those are the things that we get amazed by

P You did not have any of that where you were

C No.

P Did you have any electricity?

C Yes, from generators, but most of the Vietnamese that I worked with, it was basically the old sunrise to sunset They would have maybe candles, or a smoking oil lamps That was about it At night, you would eat and you would go to bed You worked by sunlight The major cities had electricity so there was night life and shops and everything. Most of the people worked pretty much like the American farmers did a couple centuries ago Instead of a tractor, they had water buffalo. They were very poor The black pajama bit, that would be their typical day-to-day clothing, just like we have blue jeans It is simple

and it is cheap and it wore well so they wore it all the day. Then for festivals, they would bring out their good stuff. Blue jeans were a status symbol over there. It is funny how you remember some things. I remember one of the ultimate status symbols of Vietnam were menthol cigarettes, like Salems and so on. That was a big status symbol.

P Did you smoke over there?

C Yes and no. I am a pipe smoker. But I always carried cigarettes and matches and all, because you would have cigarettes together. So I always carried cigarettes. I was lucky. I had training in language because being a Vietnam officer, I knew. Here in the U.S. people think one thing if they see a couple guys walking down the street holding hands. In Vietnam, that is what friends do. So I got to where I could accept that. The first time one of my counterparts started holding my hand, I did not stretch, scream or whatever. I was lucky because I knew the culture and the people. Most Americans did not. I am probably damn near tone deaf. Vietnamese is a very tonal language. A word will have several meanings just the way you pronounce it. The word Ma can mean mother, ghost and tiger, depending on how you pronounce it, just by the tones. It is almost just as bad as French. I know I used to talk, and people would be rolling on the ground laughing and I would say, "Okay, guys, tell me what I said!" I knew what I wanted. But they were very friendly people, as long as you would meet them half-way. If you treated them decently, they were fantastic people. I loved them. It is hard for us to imagine where a status symbol is having a pack of Salem cigarettes or a Timex watch, things like that, or a steel pot. A motor scooter or a motorized bike. Things we take for granted. Incredible. Still, after twenty years. I mean, a pack of cigarettes was a status symbol. At times, it was such a feudal society, very class-conscious, very status conscious, very much more so than we are. A lot of it tied back into the French where the only ones that got ahead under the French were those who went for the French. So, if you supported the French, you could go on for schooling, and get the good jobs. If you did not or did not have connections, you stayed a peasant or became a Viet Cong. When you think of things that we take for granted, like an electric fan, that was a luxury, or a car. Like I said, for transportation, you would have buses. They would have crates of chickens, pigs, baskets of fruits and vegetables on top. People would be crammed into the seats. They would be standing in the aisles, they would be hanging on the bus. That was major transportation, because otherwise, you walked. People walked.

People had a hard life there. They had a very hard life. They did not complain. They just wanted to be left alone so they could live their life, a contrast with what I saw in Saigon. We were there for training six months after we had been doing the job. We ate, I cannot remember which restaurant it was, either at the Caravel or the Majestic. This was built during the French era. It was all marble and had a restaurant on the top floor. It was all glass. You could see the stars. It was marble pillars. We had about a seven course meal, Chateau Brionne, wine, cheese, for about five dollars a piece. French cooking, too. The waiters were French and everything. It was such a difference in class. A lot more noticeable than we notice here. Like I said, a couple blocks, you got slums, a

couple more and you have got champagne and caviar-type lifestyles Incredible

When I came in 1971 the Vietnamese money was worth about \$270 of their dollars equaled one of ours When I left, it was over \$400 to one of ours It was practically monopoly money It was fun playing poker "I'll see your \$5000 and I'll raise you \$10,000." One of the things that the American's did that did not help, the typical American G I probably saved most of the money and sent it home, but he would go out one night and spend maybe fifty or one hundred dollars, which is like a year's pay for these people, and think nothing of it For the contrast, we gave them good lessons in how to hate Americans Like any other culture, we probably made more mistakes than we did things right there

P It has got to be hard thinking about that.

C I have always wondered My people would have been on death lists, because of what we were involved in A lot of the operations we worked on were the CIA Phoenix type We were serious When we got involved it was quite serious The scouts I had, most of them were former Viet Cong. Probably very few of them survived. The lucky ones may have gotten out with their families, about seventy-five or so, but most of the Vietnamese that escaped first, were not the ones closest to the Americans, they were the ones that had the political connections and the money The ones that did most of the fighting, like you talk to people who specialized in the mount yards, which are Vietnamese hillbillies, we deserted them wholesale For the most part, we deserted the Vietnamese It was something that we wanted to forget, so we forgot them

P Is there anything that you would like to add that I did not cover, or thought that maybe I would ask?

C Like I said, most Vietnam Veterans have adjusted Generally, though, the younger they were and the more combat they saw, the harder for them to adjust. The Marines generally had a worse war. A guy who was like eighteen or nineteen, he came out of high school or maybe even dropped out, a year after that, he was killing people A couple days after he was doing that, he was on a plane coming home and It is like, "Gee, sonny, how are you doing?" There was just no transition That was the thing that they had with troops coming home. You did not have the chance to depressurize or come off of it, to adjust But I know even when I came, I landed at Fort Dicks That was it. I had nothing as to what to expect Two days before I was home, I was getting shot at. There is just no readjustment period or anything Very extreme

P Thank you.

End of Interview