Dayton and Miami Valley Oral History Project

4-12-2001

Mark Striebich interview for Wright State University History Course 485

Joe Miller

Mark Striebich

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Interview with Mark Striebich on his experiences during the Vietnam War. The interview took place in his classroom at the Trotwood-Madison High School. We were in a spacious room on the second floor seated at a table across from one another. The walls were decorated with anger management posters (which are part of the tools of his trade as a special needs teacher) and newspaper clippings of moments in African-American history and Vietnam memorial stories.

**What age did you go into the service?**
I was drafted 17 September 1969, I was 19 years old.

**What were you like as a 19 year-old?**
I was brought up as a working class kid in Appalachian Ohio, it was great.

**What was your view of the Vietnam War before you went?**
I was pro-military, pro-government, and pro-war. But I saw it as winding down.

**What did you think of the anti-war protestors?**
I was not against them, I figured they had a right to their opinion. In retrospect I think I resented them slightly.

**What was boot camp like?**
Physically, I was in shape so in that respect it was easy, but it was also very intense. I really enjoyed that intensity, but I had problems with the rigid authoritarianism where someone was getting in my face. All of my training was progressively moving me toward a slot in Vietnam and I knew, and was ok with that.

**How did you travel to Vietnam?**
I took a series of flights starting in Fort Dix, New Jersey; through Washington state, Anchorage, Alaska, Korea and finally into Vietnam.

243 Were you nervous?
I was very nervous, and apprehensive, but I won't call it afraid. I ran into a friend of mine from High School who was headed back from Vietnam who advised me to take off, and not to go. I didn't take his advice, I was too nervous and not thinking clearly to process what he was saying.

273 So you step off of the plane, tell me what you see?
I arrived at Ben Wha Airbase, which was a very busy, very dangerous place. It was undoubtedly the largest airbase in the world at that time. It was a huge reality check, I was in the place that everyone talks about. The country was beautiful, but the whole situation puts you into a mild state of shock.

327 What did you think about what you saw?
The heat was staggering, and there was a sea of young military personnel running around.

342 What were the living conditions like?
It was primitive, but it wasn't too hard to adapt.

364 What stands out in your memory about Vietnam?
The heat, the extreme heat. The beauty of the country, and the diversity of the terrain, the monsoon rains.

390 What events stand out in your mind?
Not one particular event comes to mind, but we would lose track of the time. We wouldn't have any idea what day of the week it was or what day...
of the month. We were just focused on survival, getting through the day. I always felt that I wasn’t going to die.

Was it common that most people believed they wouldn’t die?
No, not at all, some were praying for the light of day afraid that they would never see it again.

What was expected of you from your superiors?
You were expected to do whatever you were told to do, period. You were not to discuss it or debate about it, just do it whatever it was. There was a point when I was burning human waste material in the hot sun. I hated that, but I had decided not to get involved with bucking authority, some did, but I decided not to.

Were there divisions (social groups) within your unit?
Yes there were social classes, but it wasn’t an envy thing. If you got to spend more time in a base camp then good for you. We were all after the same goal, and that was to survive and get out in one piece.

Was that everyone’s goal, just to stay alive?
It was all about survival and to get out of there. We were not there to win the war in 1970, major actions were very sporadic and random at that time.

How did your experiences in Vietnam change you?
As soon as you come home every minute is a party, and I felt like I could do anything. It has been very important to who I am today. I will be part soldier until the day I die. I also have a positive pride about it. I served, I was there and I am proud of that. There is always a little bit of heaven in a disaster area; it’s just up to us to find it.
How did it feel to reacclimate to civilian life?
It was a joy to get used to the usual freedoms that we take for granted. There were no guns, and that was something to get used to. Guns exist to kill, and when you are carrying one, you have an aggressive mindset. In the civilian world, you can’t have that mindset, you have to control your anger and that took a long time. I had to find a purpose for myself when I came back.

What was that purpose?
My purpose is to be there 24-7 for my two children. Secondly, I developed an innate ability to work with youth in education.

What shocked you about Vietnam?
The violence shocked me about Vietnam; the death was shocking. Our country did an injustice to lot of young men and women who are dead and mentally and emotionally wounded.

What were your good experiences?
Seeing such a beautiful country was great and I took opportunities to enjoy the moments. I also remember good friendships that I had, and continued to have for many years afterward.

What do you mean by people you can’t trust?
Humans, being human, will screw up. So I learned to arrange myself so that if somebody screwed up I was going to be ok. I never relied very much on other people if I could help it. And that’s not a negative thing, but a philosophical view.
How did your perception of the War change from what it was before you went to after you had been there?

It wasn’t just perception because now I had been there, I had first hand experience of Vietnam that I didn’t have before. I have experienced it and now I know something about what it was like. I think we could have won the war if we had really wanted to and saved a lot of death. There were a lot of errors made that cost a lot of people their lives.

How do you think that popular movies portrayed the Vietnam War?

I never really watched most of them, I am not a fan of the movies in general, but I am familiar with most of them by title. I would have to say that they don’t accurately reflect anything but the killing aspect of the war. That was important, maybe the most important aspect, but it certainly was not the whole story.

Change of location: Now we are inside of a small office in a corner of his classroom with walls between us and a small class that taken their seats in the intervening moments while the tape was stopped. The room is a smaller version of the classroom, but the items on the wall are more personal in nature, and less in the form of instructing students who might read them. He has an article from the Dayton Daily News laminated and put up above his desk, which he will refer to in the summary.

There was no question asked. The narrator wished to sum up his experiences and say a few last things.

The Vietnam War completely changed the direction of my journey (life). It was a very intense but good time. I hesitate to say good, because that places moral judgment on it. The majority of the time, Vietnam rarely comes up in conversation, but it is definitely a part of who I am. It is certainly not the biggest part of me, nor is it the hardest thing I have ever gone through. I have no regrets whatsoever.
Ok, today is the 12th of April, this is tape number one and I am talking with Mark Striebich. This is our initial interview (probably our only interview, but...) we are going to start right now.

I am going to start with the years before Vietnam. You went in at what age?

I was drafted on the 17th of September 1969.

So you were drafted at what age?

I was 19 years old. I was a High School graduate. I had one half year of college, in. I had quit college returned home and actually I had informed the draft board in the spring of 1969 that I was no longer in school, hence I had in essence given up my deferment and made myself eligible for the draft, I felt that was the right thing to do at that time.

What was your life in that half year of college after graduating high school, what were you like?

Hmm, what was I like as a young person, post high school and pre-draft? Well, I was brought up in the foothills of Appalachia a little town called Bellaire, Ohio right on the Ohio river. I was brought up in a working class environment, pro-God, pro-country, pro-hard work, and pro-accountability. It was a great place to grow up, great place. I went to college in the very early summer of 1968 to pursue a goal that I had at the time to be a professional football player. Typical of 18 year olds, it wasn’t very realistic but it was to me. The dream fizzled.

I went to Findlay, Ohio; I went to Findlay College, which is now Findlay University. I did some pre-college course work to get myself certified to start college. In August of ’68 began my short-lived college football career. I was happy, I was energetic, I was living a dream. I left home and I was doing what I wanted to do. It was great. I was a very, very happy person, very happy.

What made you leave college?

College then, much like now, required you to give effort and try and to attend class. I didn’t have trouble attending classes but I realized very quickly that I was not interested in school as far as applying myself. I just wanted to play football, laugh a lot and do the things that 18 year olds did. The reality was, and this has not changed, that if you are not in school to be serious about it then you will pretty quickly be weeded out of school. That was fine with me, I went to school because I wanted to go to school because I wanted to play football, but I really didn’t want to go to school for the academia part. So school didn’t last long.

What was your view of the Vietnam War, before you went?
Well, I think it’s fair to say, given my age and when the conflict actually started in the 1950’s, I grew up with the war. Since the draft was the main means of adding humans to the war effort, you would be hard pressed as a young teenager in the 60’s not to know someone, or not know a lot of people, who were drafted or who enlisted. Given the way I was brought up the way I was reared, I was pro-military and pro-government. I also, typical of teenagers, I wasn’t the smartest young person around so I was probably a little naive about the whole big picture. But if I had to be either for the war or against the war in 1960, I was definitely pro- the war. 

You were talking about you views before the war . . .

I was definitely pro- the conflict. The height of the Vietnam War would have been the years 1964-1968. When I say the height of the war that was the majority of troops. That was, without question, our country’s biggest offensive assault period of time. We were still fighting a war during that period of time were we felt we could win. By 1968 I think it was pretty obvious to the people running the war that we were not going to win the war, we were only going to prolong what was happening. But I didn’t realize that at the time. I wasn’t that smart.

What did you think of war protesters? Did you see them at all?

Oh yeah, you would have had to have been a blind person not to see protests. I have to admit... Now today, ironically, is my fifty-first birthday. I look back, and I remember it very well, I was not anti-war-protester because I was brought up, and adopted the philosophy that you are entitled to your way of looking at things just as much as I am my way of things. But I probably, if the truth be known, I resented the protesters a little bit. I can say that now in hindsight. Yeah, I probably resented them at the time.

How did that play out in your actions, or did it in any way?

For the most part it was not an overt, play out conflict. It was, well this is all prior to my being in the military also, so I was pretty much a happy go lucky person so if you want to protest the war that’s your business kind of an attitude. I doesn’t matter if I agree, if you want to protest the war, protest the war, it doesn’t bother me at all.

You were drafted in ’69, [yes] what was boot camp, and all the rest of that like?

Well actually, in looking back, and I’ve had the conversation countless, countless, hundreds times. I was an athlete, so I was physically fit, and so... I had been well prepared what to expect. I had, I can’t tell you how many friends who had been in the military so I knew what I was getting into prior to getting into it.

Boot camp was very intense, it was very physical. Actually in a somewhat distorted type of way I kind of liked it a lot, it was pretty of fun. I didn’t mind intensity, I kind of liked it. I didn’t find it too be too difficult, because, as I said I was an athlete so I was in shape. I did not enjoy people in my face telling me what to do and when to do it. No, I did not enjoy that and I had some difficulty with that. But those are things that we, we learn to cope with. But no, that
was the worst part of all. Basic training was having somebody in your face, routinely in your face. Physically, no problem at all.

**Where did you go out of boot camp? I know they didn’t ship you directly out to . . .**

No, my basic training was in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. That’s in Columbia, South Carolina, the state capital. There’s the University of South Carolina there. There were some extenuating circumstances that we’ll not get into that delayed my ultimate, next assignment from basic training. I finished basic training in what would have been November of 1969, and stayed at Fort Jackson for several months before I was assigned to my AIT, which is the next phase in the military after basic training. It wasn’t a big deal, but it was a delayed thing, it was all right.

**What does AIT stand for?**

AIT is Advanced Infantry Training. It’s a progressive type of a situation, you go to your basic training, and then you move on. In moving on, it depends on what your MOS is going to be. An MOS is your, Military Occupational Status; it’s what you going to do. Depending on what the military chooses for you to do will dictate where your assignment will be, and what your assignment will be.

**Where was your first permanent duty station?**

First, permanent duty station would have had to have been South Vietnam. Because prior to that, from September of 1969 until May of 1970 was a series of temporary stops to get me prepared for where I would ultimately be. So I didn’t have a permanent duty station until I was assigned to the Vietnam situation.

**Did you realize as you were being trained that that was your ultimate destination?**

Oh yeah, I realized that, yeah. There were no surprises at all. And that was fine, that was fine. As a 19 year old I had the attitude, and the philosophy that it really didn’t make any difference what they did with me or where they sent me. I was, I was not going to be killed. Really the thought never entered my mind. I had the feeling that I was indestructible. It sounds a little silly, but it was also very true.

**So how did you get to Vietnam? Plane, train...**

Plane, percentage wise most when by plane, some went by boat, none went by train

**Yeah, it’s pretty hard to take a train there...**

Pretty hard. My journey went from Fort Dix, New Jersey to Seattle, Washington. I forget the name of the Army base there. To Anchorage, Alaska from Anchorage, we flew across the Pacific to Korea, and from Korea we refueled and moved into the last leg of the journey, which was to South Vietnam.
Where you nervous during that flight?

I was very nervous. Yeah, I was very nervous. I think that … as we speak I can remember the plane flight. Yeah I was nervous I had probably two or three day’s worth of diarrhea. And I won’t call it a fear, but that’s because I wasn’t very smart.

I did run into a friend of mine in Anchorage Alaska. Actually it was one of those one-time things. It was a friend of mine from high school and he was on his way back to the United States having spent, I think, fourteen months in Vietnam as a United States Marine. His advice to me was to leave the airport in Anchorage, Alaska and to leave, to just go somewhere, “don’t, don’t go.” I said, “Well I can hardly do that”. “No you can do that and you should do that.” But you know, “thanks for the advice but I think I probably should do what I am supposed to do.” “They just don’t let you leave, and [say] ‘oh forget it we have others’.” But I did think about his advice. But I didn’t take it.

How did that... what kind of a thought did that put in your head when he said that you should leave?

Well, it was pretty obvious that, for him, the war experience was very traumatic as an infantryman in the United States Marine Corps. I respected what he said, but at the time I was all caught up in the nervousness of the situation. I think it would be fair to say that I was not clearly thinking. I wasn’t processing thing logically. First of all I was 19, what are you at 19. Lets pause for a second...

<interruption>

Ok so you step off the plane in what city?

I believe most incoming traffic to South Vietnam was routed through a tremendously, tremendously, large air base called Bien Wha. Bien Wha was right outside of Lon Bhin, which was very close, geographically, to Saigon. And as a matter of fact in that time the mid- to late 1960s there is no debate that Bien Wha airbase was the largest air traffic base on the planet. Flights coming in and flights leaving on just a non-stop.

We were always bringing troops in and we were always sending troops home. It was a constant. Given that it was a constant, though, it was always a place, Bien Wha was, were the enemy would... it was a good place for the enemy to spend time. Because, what a good place to inflict havoc, you’ve got it right there. The flipside to that would be that, wee were as a base well fortified. It was no secret to anybody in the war game; that if I am the enemy I want to attack the air base because that’s where planes and people are. But if I am the United States we are well aware of what you want to do and if that’s what you want to do go ahead because we are better than you militarily. And we were, so there was always some action at Bien Wha airbase.

So you step off the plane there, take me through the process, what do you see?

Well prior to stepping off the plane of course you can see what you are about to … You, I mean it’s … I think that the best way to describe it would be that it is a reality check. No more newspaper, no more second hand information, this is the place that everyone talks about. So in
your head, your saying no this really can’t be the place that everybody talks about, is this Vietnam? I don’t know how long it took to capture the actual realization that you there in a hostile fire zone, in a war.

It was a beautiful country; from the air it was absolutely beautiful. A beautiful sky, beautiful country, but it was a war zone. But being 19 your just, I don’t know if amazed is the proper word but, I think shocked. Your just gaping mouth open, durn this is really the place. I can remember it quite vividly.

**What did you think of what you saw when you got off the plane?**

Well, I can remember... first of all it was intensely hot. I’ll never forget that. I mean if you were to look at Vietnam on the map you would see that it is very close to the equator. And of course as we get closer to the equator the hotter things are. It’s a tropical climate, so the heat was staggering. I don’t know what the temperature was, it was hot. Was it 100 or 110? Probably, but hot is hot. The Bien Wha, Lon Bhin base camp where people came in and people left was just a sea of people everywhere you looked it was military people, young people. It was hot. I remember it as hot.

**What were your living conditions like there?**

It varied, but I think it is 100% accurate to say that you adapt to what you are confronted with and that is what become normal. Of course there is no flush toilets; there are not hot and cold water facilities like you are used to. You do not have houses. That entire part of your life is gone. You are either going to live outside or you are going to be part of the time in what is called a hootch. Which is in essence a house, but it is not a house as we would know it. But really that was not an issue at all. I don’t even remember it as being a big deal at all. That’s my take on that whole thing. For other people it was difficult, uncomfortable. But once again given the type of a person I was at that point in my journey it wasn’t a big deal at all.

**What are some of your memories, what stands out about your time in Vietnam?**

An awful lot. Beautiful country, just absolutely... and I’ve been a lot of places in the world. It was just an absolutely beautiful country. The heat, I have to go back to the heat, was extremely hot at times. It seemed like the sun was three times the size so to did it increase the heat threefold. But during the monsoon it just rained, and rained, and rained, and rained.

As a matter of fact, today is Thursday so I think it would have been Tuesday night this week we had some storms in the area, I’m sure you know, I had my poncho on and I was outside of my house in the dark and the lightning and in rain and I was just reflecting.

So I’ll never forget the monsoon rain and the heat, the terrain. You can go from rice paddy, knee deep in water to a beautiful mountain in 30 minutes. To an hour and a half truck ride you can be on the South China Sea and think you’re in Hawaii. But that was due to being in South Vietnam as opposed to North Vietnam. Much like southern Ohio versus northern Ohio, the terrain would change. It was a beautiful place really, beautiful.

**What kind of, I don’t want to poke at sensitive subjects but, what events do you remember?**
Well

[does anything stick in your mind?]

Rather than isolate or focus or concentrate on any one, really not one particular moment jumps into my mind. Rather the entire situation. You learn rather quickly that, sometimes you lose track of what day it is. Sometimes you lose track of what day of the month it is, because it is just today.

I think that was one of the realizations when were in America, and were back home, we typically are aware of what day it is, what day of the week it is, what we’ve got going on and what we have to take care of. Upcoming things that we are looking forward to and reflect on how yesterday I didn’t do this very well. But that all changes. Your job is to live to tomorrow and some days that’s easier said than done and sometimes it’s not that difficult at all. I think that is; when asked that question, and I’ve answered that question many times; it’s just the time has a way of just becoming the immediate moment as opposed to the 12th of April, Thursday. It’s just today. Sometimes in conversations with your friends you would say, “Well let me stop and think for a minute”. Because typically we don’t have calendars. So you say, “well is it Thursday?” And it was actually pretty funny and it all, once again, depended on your attitude.

I always had a good attitude about things. It was very easy to adapt and that made, for me, that made it very bearable. I’m not going to say that it was easy, but it was very bearable. Heck your 19, I mean what’s the worst that could happen? You die, and I never really believed that that was going to happen. I really didn’t. That’s not to say that I wasn’t scared, but I never, ever, believed I was going to die in Vietnam, never, not one time.

Was that a common experience for most of the guys in there?

Good question... No I can’t say that. Common, in that lots of people felt that way. Uncommon in that many people prayed for the light of day fearful of the fact that they might not see it. So common, I guess, is relative to the individual. No, not everybody felt that way. No.

What was expected of you as an infantryman from your superiors?

Well first of all I should clear up the fact that for the majority of the time I was not in the infantry. Now, I’ll not get into particulars but I’ll say, to answer your question, what was expected. Generically it was real simple: you do what your told. You do not question it, you do not debate it, they are not interested in what your opinion on the subject is, no matter what it is that you are asked to do. No matter what. It could be as insignificant as... and I think back to May of 1970 where, I think this is accurate to say of most of the troops in South Vietnam, our latrine consisted of taking 40-gallon drums of oil or whatever they might contain, and cutting them in half and creating makeshift toilets out of drums.

Well given that we did not have hot cold water flush facilities you adapt to ways of using the bathroom, that doesn’t go away. So for example one of the early duties that I had that I really did not enjoy was burning waste material you get a 40-gallon drum cut in half, lets just make up a number, you get 18 gallons of waste materiel and your told, ‘now you go burn that’. I didn’t like that. As I say this I can remember thinking what the hell am I doing here, I am burning shit,
in Vietnam. And if I don’t move quickly the wind is going to blow it into my face. In the heat of the day that is a God-awful stench.

So you find humor in an absolutely absurd situation where you’re ducking the breeze of the smell of burning waste materiel. But if that’s what you’re told, then you really only have two choices: you can just do it, or you can say I’m not doing it. I never chose to do that. The penalties weren’t good.

**Were there people who did?**

Oh you know there are always people who will do things their way, even in a combat zone there are consequences, but sometimes they were not immediate. The military was always good at disciplining people. Maybe an Article 15, which was paperwork, it would reduce you in rank, take money from you. But really it was kind of a joking matter.

Many young people would say, I am a corporal, which is an E-4, and now your going to bust me to an E-3 so instead of making, and I don’t remember exactly, instead of making $125 a month, now maybe I make $95 so oh-boy, that’s my punishment. So it was inconsequential, it was meaningless. But I chose not to get involved with playing that game it wasn’t worth it.

**Were there divisions in the... within your... I want to say squadron because I know Air Force terms, but within your...**

When you talk about divisions, you mean as people?

**Yeah, kind of distinct social groups?**

Social groups that’s a good way to put it. Yeah I think there’s no question that existed. If you spent, and I think it’s important to clarify that were talking about my experience May of 1970 through April 1971. Our government, our country had pretty much realized that we were not going to win the war. Our efforts of the previous 12 years had been for naught. So the offensive part of the war at this period of time had really dwindled to not much. Military maneuvers were random, major assault action was not often.

Now if you want to talk about 1966-67 I don’t think it makes a difference if you’re in the northern or the southern part of the country. We were as a nation, much more offensive minded. By the period of time I am referring to, we were beginning to bring troops home at a much more... we were bring many more troops home than we had ever brought home before.

So the social part, if you spent a lot of time in the field you had a field mentality. Which was always going to be more fearful because there is something about several days going by and nothing happening that gets you into a mode of, well I guess nothing is going to happen. And as soon as you take on that mentality that’s when people get injured and that’s when people get killed.

And the Vietnamese were much, much smarter than we ever gave the credit for. They had been fighting for generations so they were just born to fight. And when you’re born to fight that’s what you do so dying is only a part of that, it’s only an extension of what you do. It does not take on the magnitude that we, as Americans, we value our lives, I am certain, much more than they do, or did. Yes there were social classes, but it was not an I’m better than you thing. It
was more of, durn if you get to spend more time at a base camp good for you. If you’re out in the field it’s potentially much more scary.

But everybody, I think it’s fair to say, had the same goal in mind. Let me just live for another day, and let me get the hell out of here, as quick as I can. I only knew a few people who they didn’t care if they stayed for five years or not. That was a minority of people, but there were people who didn’t want to leave, and there were reasons why they didn’t want to leave.

That’s interesting, the focus wasn’t on winning or even...

Not in 1970, no, no it wasn’t.

It wasn’t even on doing a good job, everyone just wanted to get out?

Yes, that is... yep. That is my take. And it wasn’t just me. We, as a nation, we realized that we had gone through the years of heavy bombing of the harbors and we, as a nation, sent countless hundreds of thousands of infantry troops to kill these little people. And we realized that the mightiest nation in the world couldn’t... it wasn’t going to do it. So we unfortunately it took us a long time to realize that traditional military approaches were not going to work in Vietnam.

These tiny guerilla people they had no problem with losing many, many, many people, because we have many, many more to throw at you and we don’t really care. You care, we don’t. If in April of 2001 the human would take the attitude: I don’t really care because death is inevitable, then we get some very serious situations. A person who does not care about living is a very scary person, and there are a lot of them on the streets. So these are the types of people, and you can’t tell by looking at them, but life doesn’t mean much to them.

How did your experiences in Vietnam change you?

<laughs>
Kind of a broad question isn’t it?

Well... that’s a good question. I guess the best way to answer that was that, immediately after my return from South East Asia, your just so durn happy to be home that every moment is just a party. You know, I’m back, durn, this is just a tremendous thing. But you know I was a very, very young, 21 years old. I celebrated my 21st birthday in Vietnam. I think that I thought that 21 was getting kind of old, but 21 is nothing. So, initially, it just fired me up. I had that elevated indestructible feeling. Not only did I feel invincible prior to a year in Vietnam, but after coming back, I just couldn’t be stopped. That was a positive because it fueled my personal belief that I could do whatever in the world I wanted to do, no matter what it was; anything, anything. And I couldn’t be stopped. That was a tremendous thing.  

<brief interruption> Thanks Ross

That was initially, with each passing year though, we gain maturity and we... I, I’ll make it the I. I then realize as time goes on that that experience, the entire military experience, which would of course include the year in Southeast Asia has made me what I am today, in part. So whatever it is that I am, or appear to be, there is no question that a year in Vietnam and my time in the military, it’s never gone away. And it never will go away, I’ll go to my grave being part soldier mentality no question about it.
Is that something that you appreciate?

Oh it is definitely an appreciation. There is no negative thoughts associated with it at all. As a matter of fact, it’s like a power boost it’s a motivator, it’s a pride. You know I wear that bumper sticker on my car, you’ve probably seen it, I was there and proud to serve. It’s a pride thing. I have never, the thought has never once entered my mind; unlike some veterans and that’s with due respect to them, we all think different; I have never felt anything but pride about my time in the military and my time in Vietnam. Tremendous pride. So I wear that pride, I’ve tattooed my body with that pride. I live it.

For me it was a great experience, a great experience. It takes a while for the human to realize that, this is a line out of Woodstock the summer of ’69 but it really is true, that there is always a little bit of heaven in a disaster area. We just have to be able to figure it out. Because if you don’t, then you can get caught up in the ugliness and when we get caught up in the ugliness we can turn ugly. But that’s a philosophical, that’s a personal way of looking at it. The military was great. At the time it was a big deal.

Switch my tapes...
< switched tape to side two >

Ok, we actually touched on it a little bit I was wondering if we could go back to it, your return to home life, civilian life, how did that feel? Was it a struggle to reacclimate yourself to a non-combat environment?

No. No, it was not a struggle for me. It was an appreciation for me. It was a monstrous joy to just be home and be able to do what I wanted to do. To re-familiarate yourself to things that we take for granted. Like toilets, and hot showers, choice of food, choice of climate; if it’s too hot, you can go somewhere it isn’t. If its not hot enough you can go somewhere it is. Personal freedom; if you want to go out tonight, you can. If you don’t, you don’t have to. No guns, no Claymore mines, no hand grenades, no M-79 grenade launchers. Nobody carries weapons that I ran around with. That was not a difficult transition, not at all. But it made for some good conversations.

What kind of conversations?

Well for example, when you spend a year being well fortified with weaponry. I think its fair to say without generalizing, that most everybody in Vietnam carried an M-16. That’s a fine killing weapon. In my way of believing there is only one reason to have a weapon and that is to be prepared to use it, and the reason to use it is to kill. It’s not for looks, it’s not a toy, it is to kill so it is an extreme, offensive-minded approach.

Now it goes against theology, it goes against rationality, and it goes against most of what structured society is all about, but that is what war is. So if your used to carrying an M-16 with an M-79 grenade launcher, having access to Claymore mines, and machine guns and then all of the sudden you don’t; well then you can discuss with certain people, and only certain people, where are the weapons? If you’re not careful, now that you are no longer in the military, the rules are different, so if you’re really pissed off at somebody, you can’t shoot them. < laughs >
Because society frowns on people who shoot people. So you must reacclimate yourself to civilization.

That was very difficult for a lot of people. The Government did not do a good job; we did not know how to do that. Many veterans had many, many, many problems because they didn’t have a way of channeling violence and the Government did not provide means to do that. That was a problem for a lot of people.

**Was there anyone, that you knew that had problems like that?**

With how to control their violence? Oh yeah. Yeah, I’d probably be one of them.

Really?

It took me a long time to... what’s the easiest... to calm down. But now I’ve calmed down, it took a long time though. But I think what it does, and this is my take on it, if you are fortunate enough to gain some longevity to your life, in spite of how you have conducted yourself then there must be a reason for why you are still here. So the trick is find out what your reason is and take it from there. It took me a long time to figure it out but I finally got it. It took a long time.

**So what was the reason?**

What was the reason? Well I have a purpose, my purpose for being here is to... well primarily it is to be 24/7 for my children. That is my purpose. Then it becomes a hierarchy. I have been given an ability, which I have taken and developed, to work well with youth. That has caused me to spend 27 years in education and to honestly say that I’ve never once got up and said, “Man I hate to have to go to school, gosh.” That doesn’t mean that it’s always easy, but then again there is always a little bit of heaven in a disaster area. So if you can find some semblance of order and some purpose to what you do, then it becomes just a fun thing. But it took a long time to find that so it was, for the better part of ten years, I did some things to try to figure what am I supposed to be doing. That’s a long period of time. That’s a long period of time to look around. You won’t find unless you look, so if you look you will find. So I was fortunate in that respect, I didn’t mind looking. So...

**What shocked you about your experience in Vietnam?**

Well that’s an easy question... I hesitate not because I have to think of the answer... but the shock was the violence... and death. You know we realize as humans that we are born to die, but war puts a completely different spin on it. Sometimes that takes a long period of time to absorb and then process. Now that I am older, and I am positive that I am wiser, our country did a tremendous injustice to a lot of people. By that I mean that... we learned a valuable lesson in Desert Storm that if you commit to war, make it be quick.

In a sense a moralist could argue, “Make it quick? Kill quickly?” Well, yeah. Yeah, because it is, in a war, kill or be killed so we’re not going to debate the morality of killing, that’s a different subject. God, your talking a about a lot of people who died. And we’re talking about many, many more numbers who lived, but are still wounded. That was an injustice that we did...
millions of young people. The government should be ashamed. Those who are still alive, the leaders, for not having the wisdom and the foresight to do a better job. Now that's easy to say at this point but that's really the reality of it. There are a lot of mentally wounded people, millions of them, who interact everyday and we just who they are, well some of us know who they are. That's the shock; death is uh... whew.

What were your good experiences?

That's another easy question too. I've said this other times, but I thought, really that the country was beautiful. I was, as a young person, fortunate enough to just kind of grab the moment so to speak, if you saw a beautiful place. As we sit, and as we speak I am in Vietnam. I can see places, people, smells. That's really kind of neat now; it's almost like going to the picture show except you don't have to leave your seat.

I enjoyed a lot of good friendships at the time. I do not, at this point, keep up any kind of correspondence with friends that I had, but I did for a quite a number of decades. Time just takes us in different directions. Vietnam was a huge part of my life, but I have to admit that it's been 30 years. Many, many, many other things have happened that have been just as important, if not more important than that experience.

But I enjoyed the country, I enjoyed the friendships, I enjoyed the lessons that were taught about friendship and knowing whom you can and can not trust. Becoming 100% confident that you can take care of what you need to, but never being so overconfident that you lose a focus of the fact that life is short, so don't get too full of yourself, and your ability. But be proud and confident that you have the ability. And take that wherever you would go. Those would be my thoughts on that.

You mentioned people you can and can't trust; what do you mean by that?

Well, I really... and this conversation comes up routinely. I guess, by nature and partly, I would say my military experience, I'm not a trusting person. I wont say I'm leery or I sneak around the wall but I think one thing that the military experience did for me; and I'm just one person so this is not a universal type of belief; that the human, given conflict will screw up. If I don't put myself in a position where I count on you 100% then I'm not going to get burned. Because the mortal will err. So I'm not leery, but I guess I've just realized that if I don't place a whole lot of trust in my fellow man then I'm not going to get burned by that. But that's not a negative, and I do trust some people. It's just a part of my personal philosophy. It's not unhealthy and its surely not negative, nor is it pessimistic. Actually its very realistic and it's pretty fun.

How did your perception of the war change from what it was before you went in; to what it was after you got out?

First of all once you add the reality of the experience to a perception, it's no longer a perception. Well you know what I'm saying, you were in the military for a while weren't you? In the Air Force?

< Interviewer nods affirmative. >
For example have you ever been to Australia? Ok, so if you’ve never been to Australia you can say, “I think it will be like this”. And in thinking it probably is like that. But then when you experience it, you go, “yeah, it was a little bit, and no it wasn’t”. The Vietnam... once you got there you knew. And I can always say, well I’m never going to say, “I know because I was there”. But I know... and there’s a different tone to that. I know what I know.

If we would have just decided in the war that we... that we really wanted to win, I think we could have saved a lot of death. And so the perception in hindsight is that we, I, if we don’t learn from history; and I know this is a cliché it’s just the truth; we will be doomed to repeat it until we learn that lesson.

So I have gained, in part, an appreciation of life and of how short things are. And then to compound that, the experiences that I have had since then really put the whole life-death thing into perspective. When I speak to classes or when I speak to groups, when I speak to large audiences that is pretty much my main theme. Life and death and a lot of people say, “what the hell, that’s all any of us have”. That’s true but the human, all so often, takes so much for granted. That’s a grave error to take for granted friendship, health, the human.

The human is really a unique, tremendous... creation. All too often, other humans just fail to tender that respect. I guess that’s why many of us, in part, teach. That’s what teaching does, we take something and present it like a smorgasbord. Here take it, and if you don’t want to take it, don’t take it, but you should.

Looking back, we made some real serious errors in Southeast Asia that cost millions dearly. Bad, bad move, bad move. Not a bad move to have done what we did, but a bad move to have done it the way we did. But you know what’s interesting; you may talk to another Vietnam veteran and get a 100% completely different take. I think it just bears out the fact that we can all see the same picture but we can see it differently. Big difference in what I thought before and what I thought after... big difference. Whew, huge difference.

How do you think the war was portrayed in popular movies? Was it accurate or not accurate?

I’ll be honest I have never really been a fan of the movies. I don’t know if this is a good analogy but a lot of people like to look at pictures of women. And I guess I can appreciate a picture, I can appreciate a movie, but I’m more of the type of person to like the real thing. So I’ve not seen a lot of the movies.

I am familiar with the names of them. Some of the older ones, from what I hear, probably did a good job. But one thing I’ve noticed is that so many of them portrayed just one side to the Vietnam War and that was the killing side. And that was certainly, probably the most important side, but if there were, and I throw this number out, if there were 5 million teenagers who spent time in Vietnam, you have 5 million stories. I’ve never heard of anything in picture that was able to accurately portray or even touch on the various millions of individual stories. Some books have done a nice job of it. If you want blood and guts and death I think that some of the movies have done a good job: Deer Hunter, Full Metal Jacket. [unintelligible] I guess they probably... You can portray killing in a movie, is it accurate? Probably. We should probably stop for a minute.
Long interruption. When the interview resumes 10 minutes later we have changed location to his office and the outer classroom has a handful of students and another teacher.

Ok we’re going to finish up, and summarize.

What is the proper way to put a perspective on it. This is a large question. I think its fair to say that the Vietnam experience was a... and this almost borders on humorous but... it completely changed the course of my journey. It put it in a direction of, and I have wondered where would it have gone had it not been for that. In hindsight you can always ask ourselves that and if we keep that hindsight in perspective, I think it gives us pro-sight for what we do in the future. By that I mean, I have no idea really what might have happened if. So only in conversation does it ever come up, because it really is a moot point. That was a tremendous period of time. I have never lived through a more... what’s the best way to describe that period of time? It was very high intensity. Good and bad are not very good types of terms they are too judgmental, but it was a very, very good time. Extremely memorable. I guess my deepest regrets about the whole military experience, one I’ve touched on in, I think, the question you had asked about, I think it had to do with shock. The tragedy associated with war, if your not careful it can engulf you and lead you into drugs, depression and worse. So we need to have a real perspective on that whole thing and try to not let that happen anymore.

The other part relative to the military; the military taught some tremendous things and you know as a veteran yourself. By nature I think the military is just a very good thing for the individual. The human does want and need discipline. I believe that 100%. Of course the military is about discipline. Can we take discipline to a different level and it’s no longer discipline it’s power structure, of course that can happen. I am tremendously happy that I was able to experience a brief period of my life in the military. I am grateful, really to my government, to my country that I’ve been allowed to do some things. I am a proud American, we’ve got some problems but I do believe we are the greatest nation on the planet Earth. I know we are the most intelligent. We allow for everybody in this country, the rich, the poor, the injured. So I’m a very proud human being.

I think the war was just a... in conversation it can be very emotional and very... the conversation we’ve had bring back some of the particulars of it. That’s ok, that’s an ok thing, that’s a good thing. In the majority of my days and my weeks, rarely do the intensity of these conversations come up. There are several Vietnam veterans in the school, myself, Mr. Booker, Mr. Jackson. We rarely, if ever, spend much time in conversation about it other than just some comments in passing. Because it’s just a part, and it is just a part of the whole journey. That’s the perspective, at this point in my journey, that I keep with regard to Vietnam. It was a long, long time ago, it really was a long time ago. It was a good thing even though there were some very, very bad things that did happen. I’ve expressed my feelings about what I think were the bad things about the war. So we need to learn that we are just one mistake away, as a nation, from another horrible situation so we must be very committed to our cerebralness in making good decisions especially when they affect so many young people.

I guess I’ll finish it by going back to one of the questions. I think it might have been one of the last ones that you had asked regarding perspective of the war before versus after. Now, since it’s actually 31 years afterward, because of longevity I’ve never had this perspective. It helped, without question, that military slash (/) South Vietnam experience has made me in part what I am today, whatever that is. It is in part what I am today, but I never let it dictate how I
was going to be. It was just a part of that period of time. I know that there are veterans who have never recovered from it. I’m sorry about that, I have a genuine compassion. But you know that it’s not an easy world, and some of our experiences are downright horrible. But if we can keep the good attitude, and I think I’ve said this twice so this will be the third time. If we can try to find a little bit of heaven in a disaster area and try to treat the human with some dignity and respect, our days will be really good days, no matter what happens.

I have experienced with my own children one of them in particular, traumas that make Vietnam easy. I look at an article that will be 10 years old this December, and I made a comment to the reporter; let me see if I can find it, relevant to the Vietnam experience. I’ll quote this article, Christmas day, 1991, “I spent a year, 1970 and 1971 in Vietnam and I thought that Vietnam was an eye opener.” I’m quoting a comment that I had made. “But Vietnam was nothing compared to the ordeal that I am presently going through. Back then people told me to survive, to take one day at a time and 20 years later it’s the same except it’s more hour to hour”. Now it’s 30 years later and I can honestly say that the difficulties of Vietnam, 30 years ago, they really are not as difficult as some of the life threatening situations that occur everyday now, with me and with my daughter. It does put a very unique perspective on the world and why we do what we do. And how we can try to keep some sanity. I’ll conclude with this; in a sense, thinking back and even this hour and ten minutes discussion, it’s very therapeutic. It gives perspective for me and for anyone who will hear this a degree of insight. If the human would generally make an effort to treat the other human with respect, we could eliminate a lot of the nastiness that occurs and make it a better place to live. Because it really is about we are here or we are not here. We are either alive and living or we are not. I don’t know what happens in the next world, I have personal beliefs but I do not know what happens. But I do know that what happens today, I am in control of. When we take control of our lives, the good as well as the bad, then we make this planet a little better place to be a part of. For my part, the Vietnam experience was a part of that journey. I am very, very, very thankful for that experience. I do not regret a thing period. Thank you.

Thank you!