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Don Davis Interview

Don Davis

John Hanrahan

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17 M 10
Interviewer: J. Hanrahan
January 16, 1984

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Q. When was it you said you went to Vietnam?

A. July, 1969.

Q. That was after Nixon's election. Were you drafted?

A. Yes, I was drafted in 1968.

Q. Were you in school in Morehead at the time?

A. No, I had graduated. I graduated in 1967. I was working in Louisville.

Q. How old were you then?

A. About 25.

Q. It must have been a shock to you at that age to be drafted?

A. Not really.

Q. Did you anticipate it?

A. Yes. They were drafting quite a few people at that time.

Q. Did you have any idea of why you were being sent to Vietnam?

A. To try to defend the South against the communists in the North.

Q. Did you accept that reason?

A. Yes. To deter the communists.

Q. You were not an anti-war type. You felt it was your duty?

A. Right.

Q. What was your M.O.S?

A. I was in finance and accounting.

Q. What in the world did they need an accountant in Vietnam for?

A. Well, you had to pay the people and keep the records. I was mostly on a base over there.

Q. What base were you on?

A. Chu Lai, in the American Division.

Q. Where was that at?

A. It was in the northern part. Just south of Danang.

Q. While you didn't have any direct experience on the battlefield?

A. Not really, they could hit you anytime they wanted to, with rockets and things.

Q. Did any of that ever happen to you?

A. Quite a few times when I was there. They would try to hit the base with rockets but most of them would go into the South China Sea. That was where the first nurse was killed, there at Chu Lai.

Q. Did they have an army hospital there?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you have any narrow escapes?

A. Maybe one or two close hits by a rocket. There was a time when a rocket hit a helicopter pad next to our office. We got shrapnel in the roof and the side of the building. I guess that was about the closest call.

Q. Did there attacks take place during the day?

A. Yes, usually the VC would set the rockets to go off when they weren't there because they knew the army could follow the projectable and then blast the area with artillery.

Q. What seemed to be the general attitude of the fellows there with you, was it a mix of attitudes?

A. You never hear too many complaining. They were there, were going to do their duty and then go home.

Q. Were you an officer?

A. No.

Q. What did you think of the officers?

A. They were just like us. A lot of them would come in and ask me why I didn't become an officer. Most of them were lieutenants. All of our lieutenants were out in the field and that's one of the reasons I didn't want to be an officer. What they needed were infantry officers.

Q. What were their opinions as to the way the war was being fought? Were they discouraged?

A. Not really. They didn't grumble, but I'm sure they didn't like it.

Q. Did you find them dedicated to what they were doing?

A. Right.

Q. How about the enlisted men? What was their attitude like any different?

A. Most of them had a pretty good attitude. Once in a while they would get discouraged or home sick. But they were just serving their country and that's how they felt. Most of the people who were doing the talking weren't even there.

Q. How did that anti-war spirit effect you? Did it upset you?

A. It didn't matter what anybody else thought. I was serving my country and that was good enough for me.

Q. You were on campus before you went to Vietnam, was there any anti-war feeling at Morehead?

A. Not really. It was more on the larger campus. This section of the country is more patriotic.

Q. There was a small group in '70 that was opposed to the war. How about drugs in Vietnam?

A. There were a lot of people that used them but as far as being a problem, it wasn't.

- Q. Do you think it was the fault of the service or would there guys have done it anyway?
- A. A lot of it was probably boredom. We usually worked 7 days a week. And you didn't go downtown. There wasn't anything else to do.
- Q. Where did you go for recreation? Off base?
- A. No, you read a lot. We had a beach also, right on our base. We had the advantage of that.
- Q. I guess the army couldn't do much about it?
- A. No, they couldn't do much. There was a certain group that used it and a certain group that didn't. Its probably about like it is here now.
- Q. How did you find the adjustment to "civilian life"? You didn't have any problems?
- A. No.
- Q. How do you feel about the complaints that the soldiers weren't treated well when they came back? Have you talked to anybody about that?
- A. Not really.
- Q. Do you sympathize with them?
- A. Yes. If they wanted to be recognized for their accomplishments. They were just like the veterans coming back from the other wars. Me, I was just glad to be home.
- Q. A lot of talk about guys going over there and then coming back and then falling apart, getting into crime or drugs.
- A. Yeah, but you look at the number who went over there, what percentage is that? Is it 1 or a 1000 people that's having the problem. I'm sure people in the wars had the same problems. You have to look at it realistically.
- Q. You mean the number of people who were hurt by the war was a small percentage?
- A. Well, I don't know. But you need to look at it like that. And also, you have to look at it and see if maybe a newsman is just trying to get a story. If he's trying to get his name up there. Its hard to tell.
- Q. So from your part at least some of it was exaggerated?
- A. Maybe it was, maybe not. But from my view it was. But each individual is different.
- Q. Were you in a position to notice any racial conflicts?
- A. Not really. In our outfit everybody was treated the same. We would get together with the blacks and have a good time. I really didn't see any racial problems.
- Q. Was there much drinking?
- A. Quite a bit. The water wasn't fit to drink so you drank beer.

Q. When you reflect on the whole thing, why do you think we lost the war?

A. We could have won it if we wanted to but I really don't think that was our objective when we went over there, but to keep the North from coming South. If they had wanted to win the war all they had to do was drop a bomb on Hanoi.

Q. Why couldn't we prevent that takeover?

A. I think we could have committed more men and gave the South more leverage. We really didn't use all our capabilities. And we were limited.

Q. Who limited us? Was it the President? The politicians?

A. I say they're the ones. The troops would follow the orders.

Q. Were the troops saying the same things?

A. Some of them did.

Q. Was there a sense of frustration?

A. Sometimes.

Q. As I understand it, one of the ways they tried to measure progress was by body count. In other wars you measured it by how much terrain you had taken.

A. Over there you didn't know who the enemy was.

Q. What do you mean by that?

A. Well, we had a Vietnam barber who worked on our base. One night he was killed trying to come in at night trying to blow up the place with satchel charges.

Q. Are you saying that we needed to have more men?

A. Not necessarily more men but more power.

Q. Don't you think they used an enormous amount of power, bombs?

A. I guess you'd have to look at what kind of bombs they dropped. If they had dropped as many bombs as they said we did there shouldn't have been anything left, should there?

Q. Would you have favored dropping some type of nuclear bomb?

A. Its hard to decide. You would have to have been in that position before you could make a decision.

Q. What about the military strategy itself, do you think we were doing the right thing using the search and destroy strategy? Do you think there should have been a defensive strategy along the DMZ?

A. I think it would have been a lot better because if you could shut off their supplies, you could stop them.

Q. Somebody said if we had put a defense line and then turn the fighting of the VC over to the South Vietnamese Army that they had a better chance of telling who the enemy was than we did. What did you think about the Vietnamese people? Were they all like the barber you mentioned or was that a rare case?

A. They would serve whoever gave them the most benefits.

Q. What about the South Vietnamese soldiers?

A. They weren't respected very much. They probably would just as soon let us do the fighting for them.

Q. That was the general impression you had of them?

A. Right.

Q. Some have said if that is so, how did they lose so many men, about twice as many as we did?

A. I don't know. Maybe they weren't as experienced or well-trained as we were.

Q. You didn't think they had their heart in it?

A. I think a lot of it was in poor leadership. Not being able to maneuver or use the equipment.

Q. Of course, the North Vietnamese turned out to be very good soldiers so I guess the motivation had a lot to do with it?

A. Right.

Q. So you've been home now and settled in your career as an accountant?

A. I work for Ashland Oil. I'm a financial analyst in minority affairs. Advise them about business, how to set up a business and run it.

Q. Has it been successful?

A. Its been pretty good.

Q. Ashland Oil is sort of a source of funding?

A. Along with the SBA.

Q. And you give them professional advice?

A. Yes.

Q. What are the typical types of enterprises they go into?

A. Anything from doctors, dentists to small shops.

Q. Are most of them black?

A. Yes, most of them are black or Vietnam era veterans. We're working with 22 clients right now. We have offices in Ashland and Louisville and I make the trip to Louisville about once a week.

Q. Are you originally from Ashland?

A. From Greenup County.

Q. Did you go to Greenup Co. High School?

A. I went to Wurtland. That was before they consolidated.

Q. Are you married?

A. Yes.

Q. Any children?

A. Two.

- Q. Are they in school?
A. One is in high school and the other is in junior high.
- Q. You must like your work?
A. Sometimes I wish I didn't have so much to do.
- Q. I wanted to ask you too, what did you think of your education at Morehead? Did you think it was a good solid education, prepared you well?
A. Parts of it was solid. Of course, you get out of it what you put into it. Some people criticize the smaller state schools, but if you want to learn you can get as much out of it as at a large university.
- Q. You felt it was adequate?
A. Right.
- Q. What do you think of some of the present situations in our country, such as the volunteer army?
A. It will work in peace time, but I doubt if it will work in war time.
- Q. How do you come to that conclusion?
A. People go in now to get paid and learn a trade. But if they were to have to endure a hardship, they would be reluctant to volunteer.
- Q. I suppose what you're saying is that if you have an army that is hired, you wonder about their motivation? How well trained they are?
A. Right.
- Q. How about the Marines in Lebanon?
A. If we don't, who else has the power to deter the communists. Do we pull ourselves back into isolation and let them take over the rest of the world, which they'll do.
- Q. In other words, you see this as a confrontation with Russia, that they are backing the Syrians?
A. That's the way I look at it.
- Q. What should we do? Pull them out or increase the force?
A. I think we should put them in a safer place. They probably went over there with the idea it was going to be a picnic and that's why so many got killed.