

Interview

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Questions (Q): Michael Downs
Answers (A): Richard Hughes

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Q. Where were you born?

A. Perry County Kentucky

Q. What year was that?

A. 1946

Q. How large of a family do you come from?

A. There are fourteen of us.

Q. What did your father do for a living?

A. In Perry county he was a Tipple Foreman and had some coal mines of his own. Then when they came from there — my dad went broke up there — in 1951, we went to Morgan county for one year and ran a sawmill and then from there we came to Montgomery county and here he was a custodian at most of the schools at one time or another in this county, then he worked at Myers cleaners. He drove a laundry truck.

Q. So you moved around quite a bit?

A. Well, when I was five we moved from Perry county to Morgan, then from Morgan to Montgomery when I was six. We've lived several places in one county but since I was six years old I've pretty much been raised in Montgomery county.

Q. So, you went to school mostly here in Montgomery county?

A. Well I started in a one room school at Pleasant Run in Morgan county, first grade. I went there until January then we moved and I attended Camargo the rest of my first grade year from January to May. Then I graduated from High school at Camargo.

Q. Could you tell much of a difference living in Morgan county and Perry to Mt. Sterling, was there a lot more for you to do around here?

A. I don't think I was old enough to know much difference, I was only six years old.

Q. You graduated from highschool at Camargo, what did you do after you graduated?

A. I went to South Eastern Christain College in Winchester, two years. Then I went to Salem in Louisville for two years and did graduate work at the University of Kentucky.

Q. When did you receive your B.A. degree?

A. In August of 1968.

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- Q. When you entered the service were you drafted or did you enlist?
- A. I was drafted. I got out of school in 1968 then the first of that year, 1969, I was drafted.
- Q. So you completed college and then was drafted?
- A. That's right I had completed college, was married and had a nine month old son when I was drafted.
- Q. It must have been quite a shock?
- A. It really was.
- Q. Let me ask you about the draft, do you think it was fair, as far as not being biased about who they took into the service?
- A. It's hard for human beings in positions like that to remain unbiased, there's so much politics in our society, kind of the American way I suppose. I think that I've had a tendency at times to look around at the people my age and I recognize that a few of them really had to serve, and I was the only one in this county that I know of who was teaching, and was married and had a child who had to go. And I would look around and see other people in the cities especially who didn't have to go. But I have no regrets, and I'm not remorseful or anything I'm just trying to be specific in answering your question. I doubt that it was entirely fair and if I were on the draft board I'd try to be fair but I know you can be under pressure that people place on you and I realize this.
- Q. What was your MOS in the service?
- A. I started out as 11 Charlie, which is a small Mortar crew. Then when I went to Vietnam I was put out in the field to a line company. We carried the Mortar and each of us carried two or three rounds of 81mm ammunition. I believe the first thirty days I was over there the decision was made, I'm not sure when, probably because of the terrain in which we were working, that the 81mm might be used. So, we just got our rifles and our MOS's were changed to 11B.
- Q. I see here that you were in Ben Hoa and Long Binh, what was the terrain like down there?
- A. Well, I didn't really work those areas. We flew into Ben Hoa then went to Long Binh for about a week, I guess intensive training, then we went to Song Be, which is a big forward fire support base and then from there we were just all over, the jungle, you know they would set up those fire support bases out there and we just worked outside those fire support bases. We would be in all types of terrain, the mountains, the bamboo and the trees and all that.
- Q. You were in the first Calvary, division air mobile, exactly what do they mean by air mobile?
- A. Well, I suppose it's a way of giving us a class. We'd be flown out there by helicopter and we would work an area for 15 - 30 days and then come back into the fire support base and stay two or three days and then go back out. And it was all done by helicopter. We went over to Cambodia in May and June of 1970 and were there for an air assault.

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Q. Exactly when were you in Vietnam?

A. I arrived there in January of 1970 and left there in November of 1970.

Q. So you were there about eleven months. Before you went to Vietnam did you know anything about it, the country in particular or why we there?

A. Well, I was a history major so I knew a little bit about it. I guess I learned pretty much from a good friend of mine George McCord, he was there about 1967 or 1968. So, yes about that country, what was going on what our mission was.

Q. Did you see any combat while you were there?

A. Yes, I did. During the first five months that I was there I worked with line company. I guess our mission was in essence search and destroy, so we'd make a run every day and then go again at night. And then after having stayed May and June in Cambodia we saw a lot of combat there. After that I came back to a tactical operation center, so I was either directly or indirectly involved with these type duties.

Q. Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese people?

A. Not a lot, we would be on those fire support bases espically on the was back it would be really out of your way. It wasn't anything like Ben Hoa. But there were days we were there occasionally and would see a lot of Vietnamese people and soldiers, that sort of thing. But out in the field very little.

Q. How about the Arvins, were you ever on any operations with the Arvins?

A. NO.

Q. Do you have any opinion as to their effectiveness or anything like that?

A. No.

Q. You were home when the big buildup was going on in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968. Did you watch much of it on television?

A. Not a great deal, like I said, at that time I was in college. I got my degree in that field, so I knew it was serious.

Q. Were you aware though that the American people themselves were starting to turn against the war?

A. I think I was at that time. Then I know when our unit went into Cambodia I was very much aware of what the press was carrying, newspapers, radio, television, what the Americans were saying about the Viets. I remember writing a lengthy letter to a friend of mine about it. It happened to be published in the local newspaper and was published in some kind of Veterans newspaper. I've got a copy of it somewhere. Anyway my basic feeling has always been that the masses really don't know, the masses generally don't know. And just as an example, at that point in time I feel that Nixon did the right thing because I was working in South Vietnam and then right across the border was all these caches and everything, weapons that could have been used against us in possibly a few days. So, I'm, I guess I'm very loyal to this country.

Q. You approve of the way Nixon handled the war?

A. Yes, basically I do, I feel like it's kind of like Russia, Castro getting Cuba. It's realistic if you can get some interest so to to speak, close to your adversaries take advantage. I thought we had an obligation to seek what is in our best interests as a Nation.

Q. What about, do you have any thoughts about President Johnson?

A. I personally didn't believe that President Johnson was a very strong leader, a very strong President. without having studied what he did and did not do during that era, my feeling would be that he just basically carried on through what had already occurred, didn't make any big decisions.

Q. What about the leadership of your officers in the field, your officers and non-coms do you think they were adequately trained to handle that kind of situation?

A. During the time that I was there we probably — in the entire company — we had one leader, a captain, and this man was taken away. He was a lieutenant, I really liked this lieutenant.

Q. Did your officers change quite a bit when you were over there, rotate around?

A. Well, must have, because I remember when I was with, if I'm not mistaken, Charlie's company I can remember having maybe four different officers. I worked a lot, I guess at the Battalion level. I was working with tactical operational system and we had a full Colonel and then I guess a light Colonel, he was very competent and he had a major under him who was very competent. That major got killed, he got shot in a gun battle and then the other major who replaced him So, I saw I guess both sides.

Q. Did you come into any contact with drug abuse?

A. There never did seem to be a lot of hard drugs. There was a lot of marijuana being smoked. Then we went back to Ben Hoa for three days of R&R one time and there was a lot of talk about it and I would guess if you were looking for it you could have found it. But I did see a lot of guys smoking marijuana, but not in the field.

Q. What about any racial conflicts?

A. Well, for my experience there were more racial conflicts in Ft. McClellan, Alabama where I trained than there were in Vietnam.

Q. Why do you think we lost in Vietnam, if you think we did?

A. Well, I think first of all prior to Nixon being removed from office I think very definitely it was a tug of war and it had to be fought with certain restrictions. And in spite of all that my feeling is that we won the war, I think that Vietnamization, pacification to be successful, I think that people were having an opportunity to go to school and get their education, those kind of things. I think that had Nixon remained as President we would never have gave up on the G.I. in the field. I think the type of guy he was, I thought he was very gutsy. I think he would have told them that they weren't going to run us out, I think they understood that. I think Gerald Ford was such a nice fella, very diplomatic, very capable, but you know he just didn't compare with Nixon. My position is that the Americans won the war until Gerald Ford.

- Q. You don't think that it was a mistake for us to go in the first place?
- A. I really don't, I mean, just like today, I wish we could get Castro out of Cuba. I think any time with international affairs being what they are, any time you have an opportunity to establish a good relationship at any time in the world, wherever it might be, you ought to take advantage of it.
- Q. Do you think we've learned anything from Vietnam?
- A. I'm not sure that you can go through an experience like that without learning, but it was apparent when we took this military assignment that people thought we would not be there long, American people to express their opinions, their congressmen and so forth. But I wouldn't be surprised if those type situations would occur again. Maybe not now, but in the future. I guess it goes back to what I mentioned earlier about taking advantage of opportunities. And we had an opportunity to supposedly support an ally there and Seato.
- Q. Really we had a commitment.
- A. But you know, nobody knows just how the government was over there, but I'm just saying there's an opportunity for it. So, we ought to be equipped better than any nation in the world if we have to go back and do some of those same type things again.
- Q. How do you feel about the way Reagans handling the situation today in Lebanon and El Salvador?
- A. Well, again we have to base our judgement on what we know, we are not always aware of all the details and the ins and outs of government. My personal feeling is that we have a great country, our democracy's great and it's one of the slowest processes which helps people out. We are in my opinion, in capable really, beyond the facts and figures to make a decision so really my basic position is that that's why this country's always survived and that's why we elect leaders who try to get people in their confidence and others that we elect to get in people with confidence and basically it's going along with the decisions that they make. That's not saying we agree, that's not saying we cannot express our displeasure as we do, I've done that a time or two, but still I'm committed to support him, President Reagan what he's doing.
- Q. Do you approve of the so called invasion of Grenada?
- A. I really do, I wish we had done that to Cuba. Of course it may have set off more than we can handle but it, aggression bothers me and I wish nobody had to be aggressive but, I know that we as a Nation have been and I know that the Soviet Union has been and will be. And I think that that would have been an opportunity for Cuba and the Soviet Union to have a landing strip there and just be in a better position to combat us in case something came up in the future. I think the lives of those people there are supported and yes I'm favor of it.
- Q. There was a big arguement as to whether he should have kept the news Media out or not. Do you think he was justified in not letting the news media in until after he had accomplished his mission down there, do you think the news media should be on the front lines?

A. I think that's got to be a decision that the press honored, that the president made. I think if there is any question as to whether or not the news media should be there, but if it's going to be a mission where there's no way they can interfere then I see nothing wrong. My opinion would be that the president felt like on this particular occasion that it was too dangerous.

Q. When you came home did you need any kind of Medical treatment?

A. No sir.

Q. How did others treat you, any different?

A. I don't think so, they certainly didn't look at me as being a war hero or anything like that. I think that I had a pretty good reputation before I left and when I came back I think I was judged by who I was. The fact that I had been to Vietnam helped, I'm sure. After I came back I taught school for two years and I became the highschool principle for sex. The word got out around students that I'd been in Vietnam and they didn't treat me as a military hero at all, but there was a degree of respect because I'd been invovled, but there was no criticism.

Q. A lot of veterans express displeasure because they didn't get any recognition when they got out. Some of them said well we never got a parade like they did in World War I and II. Did you ever feel like that?

A. I thought that the people who would have wanted to do that just really weren't in a position to do so. Nobody understood. Being fair to all sides you'd have to say that any war is war of this type, and whether you were in Vietnam or Germany or where, you're life was at stake and you were away from you're family and it's just tough, war is war. And, if that war had not lasted as long as it did, if it had been a clear victory. But very few of the vietnam veterans probably even thought we were at war and very few of the citizens probably thought we were. So, in view of all that I didn't expect any type of parade or anything like that.

Q. I think one of the quotes I heard was, we won all the battles but we lost the war and I think a lot of them feel like that because I don't believe the military was ever equipped in the field.

A. We won the war though until . . .I feel like we won it and then gave it back. Nixon and all the military under his direction won the war, and that's my feelings and then Nixon was bringing people back home, that's why I got home forty-five days early. This had already been done to some extent, but during the end of our time over there there were a lot of drops and I came home forty-five days early, so there was a move to reduce our number of people over there under Nixon and turn it over to the Vietnamese and I believe it would have been more successful had not Nixon been removed from office.

Q. A lot of the problem in this parade idea, it wasn't like in World War II where all total units were sent over. But in this you were picked out here sent over for a year and you came back, it just wasn't like it was in World War II where you had thousands coming back at the same time, you just sort of straggled back. Do you think there should have been any type of program when the veterans came home, kind of a debriefing session, a week or two to readjust, you know one day you're in San Fransico and the next day you're home. Do you think maybe that's what caused some of the emotional problems when we came home, adjusting to the American way of life again?

- A. I'm not really as informed on the emotional problems as I should be. Now, my brother who is fifteen months younger than me came back from over there in I believe august or September and I went in January. I hadn't been able to see if he had problems. He had a pretty bad situation and I think personally there were some adjustment problems. But I don't think they were really that significant, I think if I had been anywhere for a year, away from my child I would be emotionally drained. I think that anytime you've been away from something and come back, it's a strain. I don't know, I can't see how debriefing would help that much. Everybody was in such a hurry to get home.
- Q. Do you think maybe the emotional stress has been over played a little bit maybe by the news media? Because you know any time you see news about the Vietnam Veterans on T.V. it's mostly the ones who are having problems.
- A. Well I personally know several Veterans of World War II for example who really have significant personal problems and I know a lot of Vietnam Veterans who do not. They come back and think nothing of it. I think that there was more pressure during that war than any other and if you want an excuse it's there. I really love and respect my Vietnam Veterans and friends who were in combat and I don't mean to be playing it down and saying that it's overplayed because who knows what they're going to do. All I'm saying is that some of the same things they experienced were experienced by people in other wars and I don't think that you can blame the Nixon or Johnson administration for the way the war was handled. American peoples attitude, saying this is what damaged me emotionally, you know war is war, is what I'm saying and the same thing that caused emotional problems in the Vietnam war also caused them in World War I and II. I would think that so much talk now-days, so many news stories, so much of what you see has been those Vietnam Veterans who were just wrecks, physical, emotional and social wrecks and you haven't seen the other side and you have those same wrecks, so to speak from other wars.
- Q. I've read a couple of studies on it and the most I can figure out is the one's with the true emotional problems are running roughly three to four percent of the total that went over there and that's not really bad but just from watching T.V. you get a feeling that it's much higher than that. Just from the stories they run. A good example is the news they had on last night, Memorial Day, everything on is about a Vietnam Veteran having emotional problems and things of this nature.
- How do you feel to the volunteer as opposed to the draft?
- A. I think it's lousy, I really do. I was as I've indicated, a college graduate, a teacher, husband and a father and I thought I was grown up, but I tell you those two years in the military did make a difference. The thing is too, when you're drafting everybody you have some capable people in all positions and my feeling is that a volunteer army, you get some good people, but you get a lot of weak people. And from the standpoint of everybody serving the country, freedom isn't free, everybody ought to realize that. Somebody had to pay the price and I don't know that anybody's any greater than anybody else in terms of paying that price so I think you get a lot stronger army and it's fair for everybody with the draft.
- Q. When you returned from the army did you return to your old job?

A. When I was drafted I was teaching and coaching at the Camargo Junior high school. When I got back from Vietnam it was November and I was stationed at Fort Knox for about another six months and several days and during that time I took some courses from U.K. In the summer of 1971 I went to Morehead State University and did some graduate work there. But then when school started in August I went to Montgomery County high school as a Social studies teacher, head base ball coach and assistant basketball coach and assistant cross county coach.

Q. You got your Masters from Morehead?

A. Yes

Q. In 1972?

A. That sounds about right.

Q. What was your major?

A. In my graduate work? Well, I ended up at Morehead getting a Masters and then I got a rank I which qualified me for a suprintendant and getting my principle positio I got both a superintendant and principle certificate. So, in essence the emphasis on my Masters was in education and Social Sciences I suppose. And of course fifteen hours above that Masters was a concentration, my principleship and then the next fifteen hours my suprentendency.

Q. Did you join any veterans organizations when you got home?

A. Yes in 1972 I believe they started a local veterans of Foriegn Wars organization and I joined that. I'm still a member.

Q. You've been to South Eastern College, University of Kentucky and also to Morehead. As far as Morehead is concerned do you find any advantages or disadvantages as opposed to these other institutions?

A. I think Morehead has a reputation of being concerned more about Eastern Kentucky people and that was a help to me. I'm proud of my Eastern Kentucky heritage. When I arrived at Morehead I really did feel that the people up there were very concerned about me and they were very helpful. I could call some names, but probably shouldn't. I got some good direction from some people there. I went to Morehead — I got out of the Army in May, then enrolled in graduate school. There wasn't that much of a problem. It seems as I look back there was these people down there with me, here was this individual, he had just gotten out of the Army, been to Vietnam, he was from Eastern Kentucky, I just felt like I got special treatment, I may not have, everybody else may get the same attention. But I felt really good, I felt better about my relationship there at Morehead.

Q. Did you go in full time up there?

A. Yes in the summer I did, the summer of 1971. I started teaching and in 1971-72 I went at night.

Q. Dr. Hanrahan, in doing this research, one of his objectives in this project is that he's concerned that the University itself hasn't done anything to recognize the Vietnam Veterans. Would you like to see some kind of a memorial, speaking in terms of a plaque, in the student center or an exhibit in the library, something of this nature. Would you be in favor of something like that?

A. Yes, I think that we need to go back to physical principles and athletic principles and everything else - your basic concept. The victor is worthy of his praise. I feel like that the Vietnam Veterans paid a price, you know what price, perhaps a greater price than most people realize except for maybe the Veterans themselves. I think that any type of a reward is good and I'm in favor of this.

Q. He's talking about maybe, if and when this does come about, having a dedication or at the dedication having a reunion of the Vietnam Veterans at Morehead. Do you think this sounds good?

A. Sure do.

Q. What is your present occupation?

A. Well, in 1979 I bought this business, at that time it was Camargo tractor sales. We renamed it and changed the business quite a bit, and it's called Camargo Farm and Home Center now. So we sell farm supplies and hardware. So I work here, full time.

Q. You got out of teaching in 1979?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell any difference as far as the way educational system is from the time you entered it until the time you left?

A. You mean as far as the quality of education? Well I really can say I enjoyed education I didn't get out of it because I didn't like it. I got my contract back and I wanted to get my doctorate. In June of 1979 I had already been admitted to Indiana University to start a doctorate in educational administration and instead of going in 1979 I came to Camargo and I think if I had it to do over I'd do it the same way. But someday I do still have that as a goal, for some reason I didn't want to go back at that time. But anyway I really love education, I say this as an opportunity and took advantage of it. I want to be a superintendent and I felt like if I could be financially independent I could make a better superintendent. This place has not made me financially independent; it has the potential to, but I've had some very significant problems, we've had a couple of tough years. But if I could see my way clear I would go back to Indiana University and get my doctorate and hopefully this business can give some financial security and I can be a superintendent, be more independent and make decisions in professional education. I think that politics are a part of our society, we have to live with it and at the same time we've got people who stand tall and make key decisions to be made, decisions that help the quality of life around them. And that's the kind of superintendent I want to be. So I think that just like here locally we've got a real good education system. There's a lot of emphasis on improving the quality of education There's a tax referendum, I think for the fall. I really feel like it's to impress the point. There's some things happening in our local school system that just aren't good. Generally, Mike I'd say the educational system here is good and I don't see that it has digressed or improved, significantly since I've left it. I just feel like there's a few things that have gone out of style that need to be brought back.

Q. You say you're married?

A. Yes.

Q. How many children do you have?

A. Three. Rick was nine months when I went in and he's now fifteen. He was the twenty-second of . Travis turned eight on October thirteenth. are my two boys and I have a daughter, Lina, who is four.