

INTERVIEW

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Claude E. Meade  
Rt. 5 Box 642  
Morehead, KY 40351

Questions:  
Michael Downs (M.D.)  
Dr. John Hanrahan (J.H.)

Age - 44

M.D. When You entered the service were you drafted or did you enlist?

Ans. I enlisted.

M.D. Why did you enlist?

Ans. For several reasons. My parents had moved from the coalfields of Kentucky to the metropolitan area of Michigan. I was a freshman in high school when that happened and its hard to live with changing that much in environment. I dropped out of high shcool in Michigan. Naturally I didn't have anything to do, no skills. So, I joined the service.

J.H. What year was that Claude?

Ans. 1957

J.H. 1957, so you were in the army long before the Vietnam war?

Ans. Yes, I was in the army, well the first time I went to Vietnam was in May of 1965, so I was a second term enlister when I went to Vietnam.

J.H. What rank were you at that time?

Ans. The first time I was E - 6 and that's on a staff Seargent. Then my job was assistant platoon seargent to a door-gunner platoon. I volunteered then. I was in Vietnam for over six months.

J.H. You volunteered to go to Vietnam?

Ans. The first time, yes. That was before the ground troops were committed in Vietnam

J.H. And you were at the Ben Hoa air base at that time?

Ans. Right.

M.D. What was the last grade of school you completed before you went into the service?

Ans. I completed tenth grade.

M.D. How large of a family do you come from?

Ans. I'm the youngest of seven children.

M.D. Do you belong to a church?

Ans. No.

- Ans. No, I was in a gun platoon as opposed to a slick, you know, helicopters, <sup>2/3</sup> the troop helicopters were called slick helicopters. They only had two machine guns on them. The crew chief had a machine gun and the door-gunner had a machine gun. They carried troops, what we called gun ships which I was with, now we didn't carry any troops, we carried three machine guns on each side. Sometimes we would have a grenade launcher, and we were loaded down so much with ammunition we couldn't, ships weren't schooled enough to carry troops. So, we would go out on missions. In your studies you probably remember the battle of Dong Xoai, we weren't there initially, we were called out about two o'clock in the morning to go there to Dong Xoai to escort some troops who were going in, to relieve the people who were there at that special forces camp. We ended up being there about three or four days.
- J.H. You weren't there then, with say an Arvin company or platoon, you really were identified as a gunship crew as it were?
- Ans. Right, we were American . . .
- J.H. Yes, from the very beginning . . .
- Ans. Right, I only related to the Americans, there was only Americans on my helicopter. We would go and support, as that one example I gave you, I guess they were Arvin special forces. We dropped them off in war zone Charlie, which is I guess it's Northwest toward Cambodia, Northwest of Saigon. We dropped them off and we were supposed to pick them up, we were supposed to be orbiting the area to pick them up a week later. When we were there we never did hear anything from them. We would support in those ways. We would support the civilians in a contingency of troops sometimes. They'd come in the same area with the 173rd and the first division.
- J.H. They were there that early, 1965?
- Ans. Yes.
- J.H. I didn't know that.
- Ans. I don't know exactly when they came in, but they were there. And, we would support them. We were giving air support to all ground forces, all friendly ground forces. We were on call all the time. I can relate it to some of the movies I've seen on the second world war, you know, the pilots would come in and the night before they'd be briefed on the mission of the next morning. We slept between clean sheets every night. That was great in that regard. But, everyday we would see these, we'd see the 173rd and first division Big Red One, they were down there sleeping in mud.
- J.H. Were you optimistic in those early days about the outcome, did you have any questions in your mind about victory?
- Ans. Well yes, during both times I was in Vietnam I don't think there was ever a question of victory. It was just the matter of when, when congress would allow the military to get on with what needed to be done. I still feel that had congress not drug their heels, had congress when they committed the troops you know, I can't say that I feel we should have been in Vietnam, I can't say that at all.

J.H. Well, we're going to come back to that particular question a little later, but I was just trying to get some of your views as a young fellow in there at the beginning. There was no question in your mind that you were serving a good cause and you were confident the government was going to back you up and was going to be victory come out of this and you know, just feel, I think you did share a great deal of the optimism that was there in the armed forces in those early days. I don't think despair or whatever you want to call it began to set in until much later, long after you probably were gone from there. In those early years, six months, whatever you can recall about them, was there anything about the missions you were on that would give us a good story? For example, things that had happened to you at the time, either a narrow escape, or something about your buddies. How did it all remember in your mind?

Ans. Well there are probably several things, but the things that pop into my mind most clearly when I think about it, you know, the things that happened to me is . . . like we established, I'd been in the army for sometime before I went to Vietnam and always, a lot of that time before Vietnam I had been in a leadership role, so always anytime we were involved with live ammunition, there was a safety factor that was a tremendous thing, everybody was pushing safety you know. And, I'd been in Vietnam as a door-gunner for probably two and a half to three weeks before I had ever actually, I'd been on missions and I had shot bridges and I had shot houses and I had shot boats, shot at them, and you could see the panelings and the wood and everything flying up. But I had never actually seen another human being, until one day, the first human being I saw, we were shooting at some boats, these boats were supposed to be carrying VC guns, and we were shooting at the boats, they had a little hooch like on one of the boats and two or three people got up and started running out and immediately I swung my machine gun in the opposite direction, because I'd always been taught anytime there's somebody, another human being in front of you, you don't shoot. And so my instinct reaction was to move the machine gun away from what I was shooting at because I saw somebody there.

M.D. Most of the combat you saw was, or all of it probably then was from a distance, it was from the air?

Ans. At that time yes, my first time in Vietnam.

M.D. Were you in any combat later on?

Ans. I went back to Vietnam as an infantryman with the 25th division.

M.D. Where were you then?

Ans. Plaiku, then went to Asia.

M.D. What were your duties then?

ANS. Platoon Seargent.

J.H. This was at Plaiku?

Ans. At Plaiku, yes.

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J.H. Do you remember the attack, the famous attack on February the 7th 1965?

Ans. I remember that, I was home on leave getting ready to go to Hawaii in February when that attack happened. I remember that very definitely because I was at home on leave when that happened. I had been stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia and I was getting ready to go to the 25th division in Hawaii. And that's where the first time I went to Vietnam, I went from Hawaii, when I left I came back to Hawaii, 25th division.

J.H. So, this second tour then was from December 1965 to January 1967?

Ans. I was with the 25th division, a Platoon Sergeant in the infantry platoon.

J.H. Now this was the ground war then?

Ans. Right, that's when I learned to appreciate being in the air.

M.D. What was a typical day like for you at that time?

Ans. A typical day, well there were so many things when you first went there. There was a lot of foul-ups.

M.D. Were you on search and destroy at that time?

Ans. Yes, and if you remember the Ta Dsang Valley was there, when the first air car went over there, they got really chewed up. It was the Ta Dsang Valley where they got chewed up. And we searched and destroyed and searched and destroyed the Ta Dsang Valley until I thought we were going to walk it completely out of existence. We would, periodically get into some moderate to heavy contact, the contact was always broken except on occasion we would be able to pin the enemy down and keep them from breaking contact. I think then that the despair you were talking about would set in later. We would go out and lose a lot of troops in one, maybe one hit and we would stay there maybe two days and leave, then come back in two weeks later and do the same thing.

J.H. That's what was happening to you? Did you find that discouraging?

Ans. That part of it yes, very discouraging.

J.H. This was a war with no front lines, just chasing the enemy, most of your battle experience then was being sniped at.

Ans. No, well, as I said I was a Platoon Sergeant and I had several, as far as snipers, you hear people tell of different stories, I'm sure you're going to hear people tell a thousand different stories when you get into this about the way things happened in Vietnam. I didn't have any problems with snipers, I'm not saying that snipers didn't shoot at us, snipers would shoot at us, but I personally would . . . you know, a law is, you've been in the service in the modern army. If a sniper fired at me when I was in the bush, I would always have several law's near my point man in my point squad and if a sniper fired I would just fire a law in that direction and it would either run him off or get him one of the two, I really didn't care. But my mission was to go from point A to point B and a sniper wasn't going to hold me up, the way he did a lot of them.

J.H. Was a lot of your experience just slogging through the rice paddies looking for the VC?

Ans. Either that or we had a pincer type operation. We would be in sort of, they would call them eagle flights. We would send a filler out and it would hit and we made contact and at that time we were beginning to recognize a pattern that the VC would make. They would make contact and they would sucker a platoon in and all of us were ambushed by people behind them. But we set up this thing called eagle flights where rather than putting people in behind them we would let the eagle flight drop people in behind the enemy and try to catch them at the same game. Of course we did that quite a bit, once or twice I think it worked real well, and other times it was just a waste of effort. Then again, I guess I'd been in Vietnam the second time about six months when they came up with an operation similar to a dew-line. Pleiku is not too far from Laos and Cambodia and one of the Hoochi minh trails, one of the main outlets was supposed to be right there in that area. My company or battallion larger unit, we set up dew lines, what they call dew lines, take the name from the old dew line, the old radar in Canada, up in there. And we were supposed just to be eyes and ears for higher head quarters and we were supposed to avoid all contact. We spent two weeks doing that and that was probably the most nerve racking experience, because we were supposed to avoid contact at all costs. We were broken down into two and three men at outpost and sometimes there'd be as much as 2000 meters between us.

J.H. Do you think you were trained for these kind of tactics? Prepared for it?

Ans. Yes, I think probably the 25th division and well getting back to my experience before. I was with the second infantry division in Fort Benning Georgia when the second infantry division was broken up on a provisional basis to train for the first air car. So I was there all the time that they were training from the second infantry division in the eleventh air assault provisional which later became the first air car, they just changed colors. And I was there with the second infantry division and I was with the second infantry division from 1961 until February of 1965 when I was home on leave getting ready to go to Hawaii and I think that next month they changed over to the first air car and went over to Vietnam themselves. So I think, yes I was trained. I'd been on several counter-insurgency operations in the appalachians and swamps of Georgia. Then in Hawaii we did a lot of training in jungles.

J.H. And at no time did you lose confidence that this kind of battlefield tactic was going to work out and the enemy would be defeated?

Ans. No, when I was there the second time I don't think I had time to think about that. When I was there the second time I was a young platoon seargent, I was real young to be a platoon seargent, and I was worried quite a bit about my own capabilities as far as being enough of a leader to handle. When I went over I think I had fifty-three men at the time and you know I was thinking, a lot of this is on my shoulders and I was concerned about that quite a bit. I didn't really give the other all that much of an account, maybe I did when I came back but at that time I didn't.

M.D. You said earlier that you didn't necessarily agree with us being over there, but did you have an idea in your mind as to why we were over there in the first place?

Ans. I wouldn't now. I didn't question it at that time. Like I said, I was a professional soldier and I think everybody looked at me as a professional soldier. That question never, I never dared even think about should we be here. My job as a professional soldier was to do what I was sent to do and do what I am supposed to do. So, that to me, would be like asking somebody that's spying do you think you really ought to be doing that now.

J.H. How about the young men that were under your command did they share this certainty that you had or this feeling of duty.

Ans. Yes and no. I can see a lot, of course the draft was probably about seventy-five percent of the forces. I don't know if that was because they were being drafted or they had been drafted or they didn't want anything to do with the army at all, because I'd seen that in peace time too even before we went in to Vietnam. I don't know if I saw a tremendous difference in that attitude than from what I saw in peace time now don't get me wrong, I think right now that we would have a better army, I think America would be better off if we had a draft because we'd get a cross-section of the American society and we wouldn't get whatever, you know, the lower income.

J.H. How about this rotation in and out, what did you think of that? Here comes a fellow and he is put into your platoon as a total stranger.

Ans. I think the big thing, and I noticed it there at that time, and I think my men did too, of course I never forced it but I used to wonder about it, we would have a platoon leader for maybe three months, then we would rotate it back to five to three and get a new platoon leader and he'd be with us for another three months. The officers never stayed out there long, but ninety-five percent of the enlisted men if they were there and that was their MOS they stayed there and there's a lot of things, but I think the army is suffering from the same problems right now. Of course I'm still in the reserve, I think the army is suffering from problems now that if we were to go to Saigon or Pleiku or some administration area you'd see people who were back there in those jobs of checking in ping pong balls they would all have jungle fatigues or jungle boots and the works, yet I had a hard time with my troops getting, I literally had a man walk completely out of his boots, he had regular boots and the soles were completely gone and we couldn't get him a pair of boots.

J.H. Well, I had heard or read many times, this is a chief criticism this rotating in for a year and out, comparison with the great sacrifice with the North Vietnamese who sometimes wouldn't see their families for years and years and years. A mark of their dedication for what they were doing but for the American soldier who knew they were going to get out, that his main objective was personal survival, so that would cut down on his efficiency as a soldier wouldn't you think?

Ans. I would think so.

J.H. Did you find that?

Ans. I don't know because at that time we were, that really wasn't a questionable thing at that time because we were among the first, what were we the third ground unit to be committed to Vietnam, a first air car and a 25th. The 173rd came over but that was only brigade. So we were the third division and this all happened in less than a year. So there really wasn't, all of the first ground troops were still in Vietnam when we were there. So we weren't into getting second and third turnover. I don't know if I could say that was a problem or not. I'm sure it would be.

M.D. You said you were a young platoon sergeant, what about your officers what age group were they in? Were they also fairly young? v18

Ans. The second time I went to Vietnam, I went over as a platoon sergeant, I didn't have an officer assigned to me, I had a company commander. the company commander was from West Point. I didn't look at him as being a young officer maybe that was because I was so young. If I saw him now I would say for crying out loud, you know. But when you look at things from your context you can't. At that time no, I didn't look them as being young. I looked at them as being inexperienced, I know I had a deep conflict with one of those out of about five officers that came in eventually. I only had a deep conflict with one of them and that was because he was one of these so called God's gift to the army. He'd just graduated from Louisiana State University and ROTC, and he knew all the answers. At that time I'd been in Vietnam about five months and he and I didn't get along. He would call me, I guess I was big on military discipline and he would call me Meade in front of my troops and I didn't go for that, not because of him, it's just the idea you know, where there's life involved, you don't have any question of whether or not I'm the leader.

M.D. I know it was my experience over there that our officers weren't any older than we were ourselves. Most Lieutenants and Captains were twenty-three or twenty-four years old. Then they were in and out too.

Ans. Yes, I can see that and that was probably right. But like I said I was a professional soldier and I'd been through all this, I'd been through 7th Army NCO school, I'd been through all the NCO schools and all. That was one thing that was a high priority in teaching in the NCO schools I was in at that time and one of the missions of the NCO was to help train junior officers so I accepted that you know. Now like I said, the company Commander, he was a West Pointer, I thought he was a good man, he moved also. The next two or three I didn't think a whole lot of. I learned to live with a lot of people.

M.D. There's been a lot on T.V. and the papers about the drug use over there by American soldiers. Did you see any of that during your tours?

Ans. I can honestly say, now people may disagree with me, but I can honestly say, to my knowledge that I never saw any drug use all the time I was in Vietnam. I can say that, I know that I have been in places where drugs have been used, because you can smell it, but as far as seeing and knowing that somebody was using drugs I had no experience with that at all.

M.D. What about any type of racial conflict or anything of that nature?

Ans. Only one time did I see anything that may have resembled a racial disagreement or racial revolt or whatever, any hesitancy to doing something. There were three black soldiers involved in it and later on, after I came back, I got to thinking that drugs may have been involved in that, drugs may have been very well involved from what I've heard. But I don't know for sure. They refused to go on a mission once and I think it was very much out of character, for one of them I know. Because one of them used to be in my platoon and I made him a buck sergeant, helped promote him. So I know it was very much out of character for him to do something like that, because he was an outstanding man. Later on I understand that a lot of people were complaining about that platoon sergeant, a lot of people had trouble with that platoon sergeant so I don't know, I say that maybe drugs had something to do with it, maybe they didn't. I've thought about it several times. But now getting to, you were talking about the movies and the books and everything that's the big complaint. If I had a complaint about Vietnam I think that's it. Because I have yet to see anything written or anything in movies or theater or television or anything that had a positive approach about Vietnam. And I'm not saying that Vietnam

should be looked on as a positive approach, but there were thousands and thousands of young American men in Vietnam who were positive and good quality people. And it bothers me when I see these movies and everything that is written, it is written from the negative aspect. And I can take you places right here in Morehead now and you can get all the war stories you want and some of them are how I would say fabricated and some of them may have something to them, you know how that goes. But I think our media and our society listens to the fabricated ones a lot quicker than they will the truth. Especially the things of Vietnam. That bothers me, it really bothers me.

M.D. There's one theory that the war was fought by the blacks and the poor, did you find that to be the case?

Ans. We had a lot of blacks. I never did know I was poor until afterwards.

M.D. Until somebody told you when you got back you were poor.

J.H. I think in general what Michael is asking is this question that comes up once in awhile of this behavior of white and black soldiers with each other. You apparently found little or no cause of friction or contact differences?

Ans. Not a lot.

J.H. Not a lot, not beyond the normal?

Ans. Well I would say even less than you would see here. I seen, here again you've got to take everything from when I was in Vietnam and the people I was associating with. We had a senior aid there who was an E-5 and black, black as the ace of spade, he was as black as he could be. And I've seen that guy set down and cry because he couldn't do something more. And it didn't make any difference whether he was black or white or whatever, he was a human being and I seen that guy set down and cry because he couldn't do anything more. You know I think you should have no favoritism at all, and I think if there had a been he was in a prime position to show favoritism.

J.H. So I think what you're saying is instead of conflict you found a lot more cooperation and willingness to work together, realizing you were in it together and kind of the human side of people came out rather than the racial.

Ans. Yes. I think so.

J.H. I don't know whether or not Mike wants to turn at this time to the question of the dealings with the South Vietnamese.

M.D. Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese themselves?

Ans. In the general population? We had contact. The most direct contact that we had, the first time I was there we had no direct contact, the second time I was there the most direct contact was, we might go into a Mountain or a village or go into a Vietnamese camp or we were out on a mission and these run from being pleasant contacts to unpleasant contacts, extremely unpleasant depending on the situation. I know sometimes we would have, I know this one time we had what they called a Mountain Yard scout with us and he was supposed to be helping us with our location or talking to people. We also had a Vietnamese army interpreter, some way or other this scout was supposed to be able to speak the mountain yard language and in turn tell the Vietnamese interpreter and the Vietnamese interpreter was supposed to question.



Here again is one of the stories, well I found in the beginning, I believe Lieutenant Calley was guilty, ok, but I found in the beginning, I found it hard to believe he was guilty because of the story I'm about to tell you. I was a platoon leader and like I said I was professional, I knew my job and we moved into this village and we segregated the women and the men, then we segregated the old men from the young men and this guy started questioning and he would pull people out who he thought were questionable and there was about two or three that were questionable. Well, this Vietnamese was going to pistol whip one of them and matter of fact he hit him a couple of times, and I stopped him. I feel it was my duty and nowhere had I ever, I'd been in the army a long time and nowhere been taught to mal treat civilians, even if they were proven enemy, you know, take them under custody and arrest them, or whatever, move them to the rear. At first I thought this thing with Lieutenant Calley had gone out of proportion, but later on I found there was too much of it. I found it hard to believe that that could happen in American military.

M.D. About the Arvin troops themselves, do you have any opinion as to their effectiveness or their . . .

Ans. Ineffectiveness?

M.D. Ineffectiveness.

Ans. I think they had, well here again we have to realize the context of where they're coming from, this has been along in their lifetime, ever since I can remember there's been some kind of war going on in that country and I think most of them would fight like hell to keep the enemy out of their little hamlet or whatever, you know. But other than that they could do what they want to. They would be really furious fighters when they were considered threatened that they themselves considered it their home land, well not their homeland but their home territory was threatened. But other than that they were very poor soldiers. I would rather have one American with me than fifteen of them. That was my experience with them.

M.D. What about the Peasants? Do you really think it made any difference to them that we were over there, did they care?

Ans. I don't know. I know we used to, before we would go into an area there would be leaflets drooped by American troops or something. I don't know what they said. We were moving into an area where nobody would be harmed. Half of them were drunk. Half of them were either collaberating with the enemy or half of them were scared of us. I don't know what it was, they were just scared of us.

J.H. Whom are you talking about now?

Ans. The Peasants, when we were going to an area, there would be helicopters coming over there, before we were going there maybe American troops came in and very seldom would you find that they would run, but like I said they were either afraid of us or collaberating with the enemy.

J.H. Did you have a certain tension about them, to the point that you couldn't tell a friend from an enemy?

Ans. Oh no, I expected it. We were taught to expect that and when we went over we knew that was the way it was going to be. The only thing I remember, when we got in contact around Bardmethuot which is south of Pleiku. There was a big operation, I believe that was the capitol of Vietnam and we captured this guy, that I still to this day feel that he was, of course we had no idea we were just evacuating the village. But that guy held himself in a manner that he had to be an officer, and I felt that he was probably an officer from the Chinese army because he was a tall guy, a real big guy for a Vietnamese. And the way he would observe things that were going on, a Peasant doesn't observe things that way. I don't know what ever happened to him. That was early in 1966 when that happened.

M.D. Were you aware while you were there that sentiment at home was changing?

Ans. No, not really. I was very aware of the fact that I didn't get, I started off getting letters just about every day from the family, And I didn't get many letters and I was aware of that. Of course I didn't connect that with what was happening or going on but thats probably what was happening.

M.D. You said earlier that, you kind of said, that we weren't allowed to fight the war over there. What was your impression of the administration at that time?

Ans. Civilian or Military?

M.D. Civilian administration, President Johnson?

Ans. I had nothing, I don't thing that Westmoreland was a great General, I think that he was an adequate General, but I felt then, and I feel now that the American people, that we as a Nation have got a lot to learn, because when we commit our military we have trained that General or those Generals, hopefully to conduct our warfare the way we want to conduct it. And when we have people setting back, like Johnson and all of these Senators and representatives, who in all I can hear of them, have never been in the service and if they had been in the service they would probably have been quartermaster officers. Setting back and making strategic decisions on what should be done in Vietnam, now that, and I understand, I know historically how our government is set up, that the military is supposed to listen to the civilian, but once that military is committed you've got to let it go. That's the way I feel about it. If the Military is going to be committed then its got to be committed with what it's capable of doing.

J.H. Did you sense that in the contact between the civilians and the military in this way that the Army leaders would get frustrated because they were not allowed to go ahead and use all their power and win this war? And they didn't understand Johnsons reasons for restraint. His fear about taking the war up to the Chinese border, his worry about the possibility of even the Soviet Union getting into this war and the reluctance to take the ground war into North Vietnam. Most of these were political reasons weren't they? Which kind of inhibited his decisions.

Ans. I think so. I think those decisions were supposed to be made before the ground troops were committed.

- J.H. There was a failure then, of these clear cut objectives before the involvement took place. The military didn't understand this perhaps, at least the soldiers did not understand this. You were fighting kind of a limited war. 22v
- Ans. Is that really our soldiers responsibility to understand, if that is taken care of that question will never be raised to soldiers, should he understand, does he understand. If that question is without question they know it's taken care of. That was never questioned in the second world war because those questions had been answered before they were committed.
- J.H. There was very little doubt in world war II of what was the reason for fighting, but there was plenty of doubt in the minds of many soldiers as time went on about the reason for fighting in Vietnam. Is that what you're getting at?
- Ans. Yes, I think only because of the way it was handled politically. Had those decisions been made, had the decision been made that either we commit ourselves in North Vietnam and possibly if necessary in Indo-China then . . . . .
- J.H. Did you have any of that sense feeling at the time you were in Vietnam or is this something that comes to you later on when you look back at it?
- Ans. I don't know. I think maybe some of it was there, it's hard to say when. Over a period of years I guess. I think those decisions should have been made either we commit our troops with full backing, full assurance that they are going to be supported. ✓
- J.H. In a way then the decisions should have committed American forces in the first place.
- Ans. That's what I'm saying, that should have been done before then, if necessary we will commit them to Vietnam and if necessary, that decision should have been committed right there, and if necessary we will commit them to North Vietnam. I think the first real big thing when I read that McNamara, was it McNamara that had this idea to build a fence all the way around South Vietnam, was that his scheme? To build some kind of fence all the way around South Vietnam, well that's stupid.
- M.D. You've already touched on this to some degree, but why did we lose in Vietnam if you think we did lose?
- Ans. I think we lost. I don't think the American soldier lost. I think in Vietnam we probably fielded the best trained, the best equipment and the most intelligent soldiers that America and probably history has ever seen. ✓ Why have all that, most intelligent, best equipment, why have it all if you can't use it? Why now do we want an army if we're not going to use it? If it's needed to be used. Why do you want to commit it if it's not needed and all, it goes back to the same thing. As far as, well, I feel that if an American soldier in Vietnam did his job as much or more than an American soldier did it in the second world war, first world war.
- M.D. What you're saying is it's really a mistake to go if we weren't going over there with an objective in mind to let the military go about their business we shouldn't have gone in the first place.
- Ans. In hindsight, retrospect.

J.H. Claude, do you put any blame on the military itself? I've read any number of cases, even by military men that have written on the war that we were more influenced by the way we fought the South, the Korean war, kind of front lines, that type war. We had in the Korean war allies that we were confident of the South Koreans, we knew where their loyalty stood and all of that. And our Generals in the Vietnam war not recognizing that there were different circumstances in which this war was being fought didn't adapt their strategies and their tactics to this war. This idea of search and destroy for example, comes in for a lot of heavy criticism that we were fighting the war in the wrong way. Did you have any feelings on that or in other words it's one thing to blame the political and civilian leaders which a lot of people have done. But there's too this criticism of the generalship of the war even by generals. Do you share some of that? .

Ans. Yes, I think I share some of it, not as totally probably as what you're getting at. I share the fact, the idea that there had never been a war styled anywhere near the style of the war Vietnam was since the American Indian wars. Yes, I think that's probably true we had never trained for it, we're not trained for it now and that's the problem, well after the fact, in Iran we tried to rescue those people now after the fact they came up with rapid development courses you know, probably we would never have had another need for a rapid development course but now, supposedly we've got something that could rescue people from Iran. I think that's the same thing . . . there's no question that guerilla tactics are something that the American Army, the American military is just not designed to handle. I think you could probably more effectively combat guerilla tactics by you and I going out here in Morehead or Eastern Kentucky or somewhere and getting a platoon of men to go fight guerillas.

J.H. Are you saying that the military couldn't have prepared?

Ans. No, no I'm not saying that they couldn't have, but I'm saying under our design of our military, the way it's being structured it's gone from . . . now they're going to something else. I don't think any of these organizations, the way it's going now, it doesn't . . .

J.H. The impression you have is that the American soldier is chasing all around after these fellows trying to catch up with the VC and the North Vietnamese and terribly frustrated. Some cases you'd read stories where they'd walk and walk and walk for weeks without seeing a soul. Slogging along, search and destroy and there was a while there when the average number of VC killed in a day was about one soldier.

Ans. I think when I first went to Vietnam that it was estimated that for every VC that was killed it cost the Americans a million dollars, for everyone that was killed.

J.H. We were getting a dollars worth for every ten dollars we spent. I heard that, it's a little bit lower than yours but probably the same idea behind it, that there was a lot of waste.

- Ans. There was no question. As far as the type, it's just what you're talking about, I say it was the structure of the Vietnamese. It's the structure of the military. The first time I was there we had, the M60 machine gun was issued to the hands of the troops in 1963. That machine gun was a relatively new machine gun when I went to Vietnam and it had never been combat tested. There was a little washer, I forget what they called it, it looked like a washer behind of that M60 machine gun. That washer would get a crack in it and it would quit firing or fire one at a time and we couldn't get the washer, it probably cost two or three cents, we couldn't requisition those washers, but we could requisition machine guns, and we'd get them by the box cars. So as a result we had CP tents as big as this room and continuation of CP tents full of M60 machine guns and the only thing wrong was that little washer which we couldn't get and when that happened we just quit even trying to order that washer and the machine gun.
- J.H. We've had so much stories in the last interviews.
- M.D. In one of the earlier interviews he said spare parts was the problem and defective equipment was one of the problems too. He mentioned the M16's, he said they got 1100 defective M16's.
- (GM)
- Ans. Now that was in the Marine corp, right?
- M.D. Yes.
- Ans. I don't take opposition to that one way or the other but the M16 was a very, very sensitive weapon. The American military had been used to the M1 and the M14. The M1 and M14 you could throw it down in a mud hole, leave it for a week and pick it up and fire it. The M16 has to be cleaned almost hourly in that kind of environment. And I feel that that may have had something to do with it, I'm not saying they weren't defective, my experience with them, I think that may have been it.
- M.D. But our soldiers, why would the military issue a weapon like that in an environment like that, there's no way in the world you're going to keep that thing clean.
- Ans. One better than that, we went over on a boat and landed at Camrahn Bay. When I was in the first division. We got on the boat with M16's and M14 ammunition. Now we're on the boat, during our move over it took about twenty-eight or twenty-nine days to get to Camrahn bay, and in the boat we were reissued M16's they took our M14's and gave us M16's and we still had our M14 ammunition. We got on a truck at Camrahn Bay and convoyed from Camrahn Bay all the way to Pleiku with M16 rifles and M14 ammunition. Now I don't know what would have happened if we had been hit.
- J.H. That's a good story.
- M.D. Did we learn anything from that experience over there?
- Ans. No, well naturally we learned something but I don't think we learned the right things. I don't think we learned, getting back to the officers for a minute, you were talking about the way they were trained were we really . . . I think most of the officers, they had more at stake than I did. I told you at the beginning that I volunteered to go to Vietnam the first time, because it had a definite effect on my advancement in my career, my chosen career. And I was a young man, I didn't have as much invested in the army as the officers.

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When you get up to be Colonel, Lieutenant Colonel, Full Colonel and Brigadier Generals in the Army you have a hell of a lot invested of your life, money, and everything else in the military. And I can see where, and I don't think this has changed at all in the military, I can see where you have a tremendous amount of yes men. This congressman wants this on paper that on paper. I'll give it to him in triplicate. I believe like Colonel Anthony Herbert. He was quite an officer, he was the most decorated man in Korea.

M.D. He was a Colonel wasn't he?

Ans. He was a Colonel. They kicked him out of the army after Vietnam, well, it may have been during Vietnam. Because he wouldn't play, he called them paper machie generals and I agree with him, our army has not learned anything. Our army has not learned that you don't fight a war with paper you fight it with well trained men. And trained, if possible for the kind of war we're going to be involved in.

M.D. Getting back to what you were talking about a while ago about our military structure. We're geared to a nuclear strategy now and maybe we can't fight a conventional type war, even though the guerilla war is not a conventional type war.

Ans. No, I think all our thinking is geared to a nuclear strategy, but I think all our training is geared to a conventional type war. And I think that's the problem. I think that's what would happen in the next war, I think it will be a nuclear war. Right now, like I said I'm still in the reserve, we had the very, very minimum training as far as nuclear action, nuclear capabilities, anything like that. I go to Fort Knox every year and work down there with trainees. I am a tester and you're involved with testing young officers and people who were being trained to be tankers and there is one phase of it, two phases, they have to put on a protective mask in nine seconds and they have to show proficiency in preparing a tank before a nuclear attack. That's the only thing they have to do now, and I feel that if we got in any kind of nuclear conflict there wouldn't be, if you read on what the Russian soldiers do far as the way they train for nuclear environment, they're so far above us it's pitiful. But now, like I said our Generals and high ranking officers who are mapping this strategy out, they get some ideas that these powers that are want this kind of training done and that's the kind of thing their going to do whether it means anything or not.

M.D. Are we making the same mistakes today in Lebanon and El Salvador?

Ans. I don't think so in Lebanon because I think the world eye is too fixed on that part of the world, I think maybe El Salvador. If I were asked the question how I feel if we were able to get involved actually with ground troops again, with our own ground troops in combat, I think somewhere out there in South America but I don't think in Lebanon, I don't think we'll have a war there, we have Marines over there, we may have two or three Marines killed or it may change to the army. Now we'll have troops there and it may change and I think all that time you'll have one or two killed every week or so. I don't doubt that but I don't think we'll have a heavy contingent of troops unless it's a nuclear conflict and that's what I'm saying, if we get into nuclear conflict, we will win it because of our missile superiority rather than our troops.

M.D. When You came back home did you need any kind of medical treatment?

Ans. Yes, when I first got back I went to a Doctor while I was on leave for leech bites that had gotten infected. They cleared me, I thought I was a big guy you know. And he gave me some salve. I was still in the army, I was in until May I came back in January and I was in until May of that same year. And everybody that was in the unit I was in the first time I was there had gotten this. They called it jock itch, fungus. I had to get treatments for that, well Doctor Burchett is the one who gave me some medicine to clear it up about six months ago.

J.H. It stayed with you that long?

Ans. Yes.

M.D. You got out in 1967. Why did you get out?

Ans. For several reasons. I was considered a career soldier and ever since, the army came out in 1959 with this thing they call pro pay. Pro pay was every year I was an infantryman during the month of November and they change, for every MOS the months were different for every MOS but for an infantryman every year in the month of November you'd take a test that was geared for your rank and your MOS and the top third scores, people who scored in the highest third all over the world in the United States army receives fifty dollars a month extra, they call that pro pay. Efficiency pay is what it was. And when I was in Vietnam I didn't take the test because the test wasn't offered, now this is one reason, there's a whole bunch of reasons, but this is one thing that stands out. When I came back to Fort Dix, New Jersey I didn't get my first pay day, I didn't get my pay, and I went to finance and I said my Pro pay is not on here and they said you weren't supposed to get propay. I said well I've been drawing it ever since it came out and they said well you didn't take the test. Well, when I went to Vietnam the test was given in November, that was the only time possible to take that test because they're afraid somebody might compromise the test but they had changed the regulations by the time I was in Vietnam and said that everybody was responsible for taking the test as they got back to the states. Well I didn't know that so I didn't get my Pro-pay. that's one thing. Another thing is I was an E7 at that time I got promoted I went to Vietnam as an E6, I got promoted to E7 in Vietnam and they had what they call a dream shoot E7's, E8's and E9's could request their next duty assignment and probably get one of the three of their first three choices. So, I went up to personnel and gave them my first three choices, I was single at the time and I wanted to go back to Germany. So Germany was my first choice, Fort Benning was my second choice and Fort Knox was my third choice. I didn't mention Fort Dix at all. I had a friend that was the same MOS as me and the only difference was he was married and I was single, he had two kids. He got orders to go to Germany, I got orders to go to Fort Dix. We said well no big problem, you know, we can change that because the MOS, the people where we're going, they don't know which one they just the MOS and the rank. We were both the same rank, the same numbers, we said we can change that. We went up to Personnel to get it changed and there was some specialist up there said no that can't be changed, no way we can change it. That's another reason, it's a small thing, but it's a contributing factor. And I think maybe the attitude of my family may have been another reason. Not the general public didn't influence me I don't think, but the attitude of my family and they were being influenced by the general public.

M.D. You had a little bit of time from when you came back from Vietnam until you got out of the army, about five months, how did others treat you? This may be what you're talking about, your families . . .

Ans. Family yes, I had no reall dealings with anybody in the civilian community even when I came back at Fort Dix I was NCOIC of the patrolling committee and we were teaching the boys that were going to Vietnam patrolling principle. And everybody that was working for me, I was a senior NCO and everybody that was working for me there at that time had been in Vietnam and we didn't really discuss those things.

M.D. What about after you bacame a civilian and people found out you were a Vietnam Veteran, did they treat you any different?

Ans. I was discouraged on several different occasions, espically when I first came back becasiue I had intentions you know, at that time I had almost ten years in the service and I knew that if I didn't stay in the military in some form or fashion that I wouldn't get any benefit at all for those ten years so I wanted to stay in reserve. Of course the draft was hot and heavy at that time, and people in the reserve unit, the people in the reserve unit probably felt threatened by me. Because I was an E7 and here they had a big long waiting list of people who were trying to stay home and off of active duty by staying in the reserve. So they just didn't want me, they'd tell me no we just don't need you and I finally, it took me five years to get in the reserve. I got a five year break with the reserves because of that. Then I was disgusted about that. As far as the, after I graduated with my under graduate degree I felt, I still feel very strongly about this, that people who are in postions of authority in many of our companies, industries, government positions, many, many of these people have never been in the service, and I think to a large extent they are, they solely, they are qualified for that position solely because they went to college in order to stay out of the service. What I'm saying is, I wonder if there hadn't been a Vietnam if this individual, now he was a qualified man to be in that job, but I wonder would he have taken the time to qualify himself to be in that position had there been no Vietnam or would he have been out here putting washers on.

J.H. In your service, in other words, you lost kind of a competitive edge to these people?

Ans. I think so.

J.H. Not only, even in your story about trying to get into the reserves, that was a handicap more than a help wasn't it?

Ans. OH yes.

J.H. And then, when you looked at people who had been either been able to escape active duty by going in the reserve or they were able to maneuver so that they could evade the draft altogether and here they are now in positions, strong positions, and here you're standing at the bottom of the ladder, and that bothers you.

Ans. Well, it bothers be quite a bit, and like I said, I feel very strongly about that right now.



J.H. Seems like you lost a lot of time?

Ans. Yes, ten years, now I did eventually get in the reserves, so I do have that.

J.H. How about general hostility, you hear a lot of these stories about Veterans returning, how about the attitude of the public generally when they knew that you were a veteran, did you sense any hostility?

Ans. Yes and no. I've been in situations where people would matter of factly offer me marijuana, you know and I'd say you're talking to the wrong person and they'd seem to think hey this guy's been in Vietnam, whether they know it from first hand or just what they see on television.

J.H. They put the two together ?

Ans. Yes, that's why I resent this attitude, this stuff you see on television. I have yet to see a Vietnam Veteran on a television program who was a straight, squared away individual. They've always got some kind of quirk about their personality or a dope head.

M.D. You don't see it on T.V. the only ones that make T.V. are the homicidal maniac or the dope addict.

J.H. You've already kind of indicated that you had some disappointments after getting out of the service. Did you think that the government and that people generally did not recognize the contribution of the veterans of Vietnam. Maybe they even blamed loss of the war on you guys, is that the way you felt about it?

Ans. Well, I don't know, maybe. I don't know if it was that strong that they felt I lost the war, I felt, well I used to have a little cartoon in my briefcase, where this guy, a veteran on crutches with one leg amputated is knocking on veterans doors, this big ole fat guy comes to the door and says the front doors for veterans you go around to the back and I think this was really, it's not true as much now, but for quite some time the Vietnam veteran was looked on as not being a veteran of the war, he's a veteran of something, but not a war.

J.H. I never heard it put quite that way before.

Ans. The second world war for example, the GI Bill in the second world war gave the veteran ninety dollars plus paid his tuition and books, right? When I first enrolled as a single GI, I was getting 120 dollars, I had to pay for my books, I had to pay for my tuition and plus this is twenty years since, twenty years difference. You tell me what kind of . . . it seems like their trying to give us some kind of token, here we'll shut you up and maybe you won't say too much. Now eventually it did increase, but this was in 1967 when I first went over there.

J.H. When did it increase, do you recall?

Ans. Seems to me it was in 1968 or 1969. It increased little by little.

M.D. It's going up every year.

Ans. And eventually it got to be where it was pretty good.

M.D. I got out in 1974, out of college, I started in 1974 and got out in 1977. And when I got out it was up to over 400 dollars a month, you know that's for a wife and two kids.

Ans. Yes, a wife and two kids. Now, you might say that's a little bit competi- ble but when you compare it to ninety dollars plus full tuition and books that may not be. . .

M.D. Well you know, like you say I was paying tuition and I was working full time, if I wasn't working full time I couldn't have made it.

Ans. I had a job working a workshop, plus I had a handyman's job.

M.D. What about the draft orders the ones that went to Canada?

Ans. I don't really, how do I feel about it? I'm very mixed because the ones that went to Canada are the ones who admitted they were draft dodgers.

M.D. There's a difference between them and the ones who hid in school.

Ans. Hid in school. Hid doing that and of course there were other ways you know.

M.D. What about the amnesty program?

Ans. I was opposed to that. But I can see why it was done. I think I can understand why it was done. But I was opposed to it.

M.D. Well, what you're saying is the ones who went to Canada, they admitted they were draft dodgers, but they should have been willing to take the consequences also. Getting back to this recognition thing that Dr. Hanrahan talked about awhile ago, a lot of Vietnam veterans say that they wanted a parade and things of this sort. You never felt like that?

Ans. Oh no, I didn't. But I did feel some kind of, like I said I came back in 1967 and I feel right now if we have a group of people who we can say are, in quotes, they are hero's of Vietnam, I think it would be the people who were captured. But then again, I was taught, and it was instilled and it was drilled in me, the code of conduct, I'll never be captured of my own free will. So, really when you get right down to it those are the ones who were not doing their jobs and they end up being our hero's, so I think it's a dilemma.

M.D. Well I think one thing that brought this out, espically as far as parades and recognition was when the Iranian hostages were released and there was so much hulabaloo made over them. That really antagonized the Vietnam veterans I believe.

J.H. You didn't get any free baseball pass. Did you talk at all about his education?

M.D. I haven't yet. Did you start college as soon as you got out of the military?

Ans. I got out in May, and I enrolled in September.

J.H. In september of 1967?

Ans. September of 1967. And in the interim I did several different jobs, three.

J.H. Was that here in Norehead?

Ans. Yes.

M.D. What was your major when you started back here?

Ans. Social Sciences, no when I started back here my major was political sciences and I ran into Dr. Huang and so I changed my major to, at that time the quickest way I could go about it was change my major to social sciences without losing anything, so I changed my major to social sciences.

M.D. He put me in the army too. He sure did. You graduated when then from Morehead?

Ans. 1969. It took me, January, well I didn't graduate, but that's when I finished my undergraduate degree.

J.H. You went on for further education here?

Ans. Yes I did I got my masters here.

M.D. What year was that?

Ans. 1974.

M.D. What is it in?

Ans. Adult education and emphasis in media, Instructional media.

M.D. What about when you came back to college here, what was the attitude like here on campus toward the war? Any demonstrations or anything of that sort?

Ans. Morehead is sort of layed back, it's always been. There may have been some resentment, I'm sure there was resentment, but it wasn't voiced very strongly. I heard a member of the ROTC, were you here when ROTC first came here?

J.H. Yes I came in 1969.

Ans. There was some vocal resentment to that, not a lot. And as directed toward me as an individual, I don't recall anybody ever saying anything. Of course here again, we were beginning to get a few veterans on campus and we were in the process of forming a veterans club. We had a pretty good organization coming along. But I understand it fell apart later on. But at one time it was a pretty respected organization. Just about everybody in it was Vietnam veterans. So we associated with each other, we didn't really associate a lot with other groups.

M.D. I was going to ask you if you joined any kind of veterans organizations here on campus.

Ans. As a matter of fact I was instrumental in helping reactivate in 1967. There was a veterans organization here held over from Korea but it was inactive. I was an instrument in helping to reactivate it.

M.D. Do you belong to any local organizations here?

Ans. I belong to the American Legion.

J.H. Do you think it was a pretty good choice coming to school here?

Ans. Coming to school here as opposed to somewhere else you mean?

J.H. Well, I don't know whether you thought you had a choice.

Ans. Well, I felt at first that I didn't have a choice for undergraduate school. I didn't think I had a choice because I'd dropped out of highschool. We had an open admissions policy here for people over twenty-one.

J.H. Do you think the quality of the education. . . Do you think it was education that really prepared you for getting back into civilian life and getting a job and a career?

Ans. Yes, I think so. I think though that I don't really have anything to compare to except people I've talked to, and I've got friends that went to school at Eastern, Western, and I feel that, well, I've definitely got friends here that graduated from here, only been in the library once or twice, and I don't know how they did it, but I know I had to practically live in the library, and I wondered if this was because of my lack of preparation for college or what.

J.H. I also had in mind the quality of education that you received, were you satisfied with it?

Ans. I think so. I'm not totally satisfied with the perception of the academic world as getting you ready for a job, but I think -- I step on toes when I say I don't think it makes any difference where a person gets his degree from, I think it's the individual that makes the difference. And I think it doesn't make any difference if a person is a straight A student it depends on where he's starting at.

J.H. A couple of other questions I wanted to ask you Claude. Did you write any letters that you saved that might be of any help to us in Understanding your experiences that you'd be willing to share?

Ans. I think maybe, I'll check. I've got a sister who I wrote to more than anybody else she'd possibly have some. I don't personally.

J.H. Historians are looking for documents as well as what we have on tape. Do you have any pictures or memento's of your time in Vietnam that you've saved and cherish, things that kind of remind us of those days?

Ans. Well, here again it's sort of ironic, I don't know how to say how I feel about it. The unit I was in you weren't allowed to have cameras. I know a lot of people in Vietnam, a lot of ground combat that had cameras, but when I was there, first of all you couldn't carry it, you either had to carry a camera or something to eat. You know a lot of cameras went by the wayside. And then it was made a policy that there would be no cameras.

J.H. So you don't have any pictures?

Ans. No, maybe there's one picture.

J.H. How about other mementos of your time over there, anything at all that you brought back with you?

Ans. Things that are personal to you. I had a pair of -- this is comical really -- when we first went over there was no such thing as a camouflouge tee-shirts or underwear. So we'd been over there I guess about six months, not that long, and somebody came up with this bright idea that we camouflouge our underclothes, tee-shirts and shorts, so I have two or three pairs of shorts that we dyed in coffee. It worked.

J.H. Up until that time they were white, is that it?

Ans. Yes.

M.D. We didn't wear them, for the simple reason we weren't going to pay, have to go down and pay for camouflouge underwear, so we never wore them. And most usually the old type would rot right off of you, so we never wore underwear.

J.H. I was thinking seriously about if I could get enough of the war mementos together to try to establish a little muesum here in the library. Kind of a archives of material of men, brought Back From Vietnam. This is what I had in mind when I asked you this question.

Ans. I've got a hat that I wore when I was on gun patrol.

J.H. Then you will take a look and see if any letters are available and give us copies? I want to establish a plaque for our alumni who served in Vietnam. Would you be in favor of it?

Ans. Not if you have to force somebody to do it. It would appeal to me if the Veterans themselves didn't have to do it.

