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Q. Michael Downs

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Q. When were you born and where?

A. January 16, 1947, Covington.

Q. How big of a family?

A. Five children.

Q. What was your father's occupation?

A. He's a mechanic.

Q. First off I want to get some background information before you went into the army. You were born in Covington, is that where you went to school?

A. No, I went to school in Paris.

Q. What year did you graduate?

A. 1965

Q. So really you graduated about the time a lot of people were being drafted. When you were in high school was there much talk about Vietnam, going into the army?

A. Not really, while I was in high school. People didn't really start getting drafted or involved until a year or so after I got out of high school.

Q. It wasn't on your mind very much then?

A. Not a great deal, it was just something to talk about.

Q. What did you do when you got out of high school?

A. Went to school at Morehead, Fall of 1965.

Q. Did the draft play any part in your decision to go to school?

A. Well, of course, at that time the draft was coming up and played a big part, it didn't have anything directly to do with the draft, I didn't consciously go to school because of the draft.

Q. What did you major in at Morehead?

A. Industrial education.

Q. How long did you go after you began in 1965?

A. Two years.

Q. Did you quit?

A. Yes.

Q. How come?

A. Well, I wanted to take, I'd been working during the summers and I wanted to go ahead and follow through with some things I'd been wanting to do, go on a tool and dye apprenticeship. so I was eligible to be drafted.

Q. So you didn't get back into school that fall and then you got your draft notice?

A. No, I called about it and then I got my draft notice a few days later.

- Q. We talked to a boy who got a job and was going to lay out one semester and start aging in the spring and they got him immediately. Evidently the schools were telling the draft boards and they were checking on attendance and enrollment.
- A. Yes, I'd say there were.
- Q. You were up here when you were drafted?
- A. No, Paris.
- Q. As far as the draft was concerned do you think it was fair?
- A. No. Absolutely not.
- Q. Why do you say that?
- A. A lot of the people that were in it, it wasn't impossible to get around it. I know a lot of friends of mine and people who were in school, were out and didn't go.
- Q. You had two years of college and you got your draft notice. Did you go to Ft. Knox?
- A. I didn't join the army. I didn't get drafted. I joined the Air Force.
- Q. You knew you were going to get drafted?
- A. Yes.
- Q. So you went to Lackland. What was your, I don't know if the Air Force calls it MOS or not?
- A. I was in munitions maintenance.
- Q. What was that?
- A. Moving explosives, mines, rockets and that kind of stuff. Transportation, arming.
- Q. Sounds dangerous. Where did you go after Lackland?
- A. I went to Utah to Utah Air Force base. Well first I went to Denver, Colorado and then to Utah.
- Q. You went to Vietnam when?
- A. Summer of 1968.
- Q. How did you feel when you found out you were going?
- A. Well, we pretty well knew that we were going to go from the time we were given our MOS, it was a critical MOS for over there.
- Q. How did you get into an MOS like that?
- A. Just luck!
- Q. I can understand the Army doing something like that, I didn't think the Air Force was like that though. Before you went over there did you know anything about the country at all? A lot of people say they didn't even know where it was.
- A. Yes, a little bit. I remember having something in history about it. I guess I knew quite a bit about when the French were there probably about as much as anybody else.

- Q. I know we talked to a lot of guys that were in the army and marines. Did the air force try to give you any type of orientation once you got there to try to educate you about the country or why we were even there?
- A. They did some. We had some classes in customs there. About the culture.
- Q. Nothing about why you should have to be, why the Americans were in Vietnam?
- A. Yes, we had classes along that, nothing of any great significance. I think most of it was just information. There wasn't a great deal of curriculum courses.
- Q. What unit were you assigned to?
- A. 421st munitions maintenance squadron.
- Q. Whereabouts was that at in the country?
- A. That was about 60-70 miles south of Danang.
- Q. How did you feel when you unloaded over there for the first time? Anything run through your mind?
- A. Well, we'd been in the air force, on base it wasn't the same. As the foot soldiers. We didn't leave the base that much, it was like a job. a regular day shift that was about it. It was a major difference outside of the base, we had nice barracks.
- Q. So your daily routine then was about the same as it was back in the states?
- A. The work load was lighter but as far as the routine it wasn't that much different.
- Q. What exactly did you do?
- A. One of the main jobs that I had to do was driving tractor trailers and fork lifts.
- Q. When you went over did you go over as a unit?
- A. No, we went over as individuals.
- Q. That was one of the main criticisms of the war that people went over in pieces rather than a whole unit. The way there were in World War II and World War I.
- A. Basically we went mostly by National Guard units.
- Q. Were there a lot of Vietnamese people working on the base, did you form any opinions about them?
- A. Some of them spoke English a little bit. I had a great deal of sympathy for their situation. I guess I really didn't have contact with a lot of them.
- Q. Were you issued a weapon, what were they M-16s?
- A. I was a part of a security guard. Security and I had at various times M-16s, machine guns, M-60. I did some guard duty occasionally. We didn't keep weapons.

- Q. You never did go outside the compound?
- A. We did when we went to Quinhon and sometimes we went to _____ but other than that we didn't.
- Q. Were you ever fired upon on these?
- A. No.
- Q. You went over in the summer of 68, so you got there right after the Ted offensive. Did you ever have much trouble with the VietCong, trying to overrun you?
- A. I forget the months but I went through the summer and fall Ted offensives. What months was that in?
- Q. The major Ted offensive was in the last of January of '68.
- A. 1968? I told you wrong I went over in the summer of 1967, it must have been 1968, and came back in 1969. That was in the fall Ted offensive. We had towards the end of the tour they were starting to get Rockets and we took mortar fire and when they had sniper attacks they would call us out towards the end of my tour I spent a lot of time on call.
- Q. Did you have a lot of aircraft there? Big arrow rockets?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Did you corresponded with the people back home, were you married at that time?
- A. Yes, I had a hometown newspaper and I kept contact back and forth with my family and friends. We had, of course, the base there had electricity so we had cassettes.
- Q. I was wondering if you were aware, of course, 1968's when the rites really got back back here during the presidential convention that summer in Chicago. I just wonder if you were aware how the sentiment was changing back here, how people were turning against the war?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Did that make you begin to question why you were over there?
- A. Yes, There were, as time went on I began to have doubts.
- Q. How about your immediate superiors over there, how would you evaluate them?
- A. Some were good, some were fair and some were terrible.
- Q. What was about the average age of the troops?
- A. I was probably a year or two older than most of them, I'd been in college a couple of years. Most of them were probably 19 or 20.
- Q. Joined right after high school then. I wondered how that was compared to the army?
- A. That was on the average now. There were quite a few that were college graduates, a couple of years older.

- Q. What about most of your superiors, were they all career men, did they have some age on them also?
- A. Most of them were career men.
- Q. Does the air force have an Officer Training Program, too?
- A. Yes. Of course, Air Force Officers Training at that time was four years of college and then warrant officer.
- Q. How about, you know you always hear so much on TV about the drug abuse over there, did you see any of that?
- A. Well, I didn't see any drug use at all until I got back home. That was one thing that everybody wanted to know about when I came back. Everybody expected it.
- Q. Most of the people were talked to before says there was some, especially the ones that were over there before 1970, but very little use at all and most of it was in the back areas, people that didn't have anything to do. It seems like it really began being bad I think after 1970 because supposedly that's when we learned the war was over to South Vietnam and you had a lot of people setting around not doing anything I was over there in 1968 too I went over in the last part of 1967 and I'm like you I saw almost none.
- A. That's really the one thing that was aggravating when I came home, when I got out everybody thought I naturally used drugs.
- Q. Do you think that TV has emphasized this and made something more out of it than what it was?
- A. I don't know, from my own experience I wouldn't know, I think that they might have. I'm like everybody else, I had a lot of doubts about it.
- Q. What about, were there a lot of blacks where you were?
- A. We had a pretty good percentage of blacks.
- Q. Did you get along alright, was there any trouble in your relations?
- A. Not serious, not like you hear on television. There wasn't anything of any significance.
- Q. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing any more than what went on back here probably.
- A. No, I don't think it was as bad as what you'd find here. Of course, off duty the blacks would tend to gravitate in groups just like we would.
- Q. That's what several people have said, they would stick together and the whites would stick together. You said while ago you kind of wondered what we were doing there in the first place. Why do you think we lost the war?
- A. Well, I don't know, I don't think it was a winnable kind of situation. Just the fact that it's a country of so many factions, religious, poor people just like in South America. It was a tough situation. Vietnam wasn't a stable country, it would take an absolute military victory.

- Q. There just wasn't any stable gov't over there to support it really was there?
- A. I think that says a lot, even if you do win, whatever you've gained, you alienated people.
- Q. Really toward the end I think probably hated us. You said there were bombers on your base?
- A. We had fighters and reconaissance.
- Q. Did they come and go a lot of the time, just in and out all day?
- A. Yes. At one time they got to where they were napalming the hills around the base pretty much 24 hours a day.
- Q. I know several times when you got where the action was, say we were in the field and we would take just a couple of rounds, the immediate response was to get on the radio and call in an air strike before you even knew what was going on.
You were saying you just believe it was a no win situation from the start. Do you think then, our involvement was a mistake?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Do you think we learned anything?
- A. NO!
- Q. It doesn't look like it today. You say you draw a parable between Vietnam and Debanon, what about El Salvador?
- A. I realize in Vietnam, after seeing the way people live over there living on rice or whatever they could, the differences between the people were more than political; we had Vietnamese who worked for us and some who worked for the Viet Cong a lot of cases, I heard a boy one time say it didn't matter who payed him as long as he got payed so he could feed his family.
- Q. Do you think your average peasant really cared one way or the other who was running the country, did it really make a difference to him?
- A. I think it would have after, it it hadn't been a survival kind of situation, when you're in a situation where you're just trying to survive the best you can to get along ideologies and that sort of thing don't have no importance whether its them or us.
- Q. The Vietnamese at the end, do you think they probably were Americanizing just out to get the dollar any way they can, it didn't make any difference who came out on top.
- A. There were a lot of them, some of them were like that. I know whenever we had scrap lumber they'd come and get that. They'd fight almost to death over a big chunk of wood, two by four or something like that.
You just wonder, like I said there most immediate need was food and water.

- Q. They are really an ingenious bunch of people aren't they?
- A. Yes. Most of the kids over there, when you talk about the history, most of the people there didn't know anything but some kind of conflict or they didn't at that time and you have to be creative to get through that kind of a thing it was a few people that I saw seem to me that you'd have to be creative. I wondered about myself over there in that kind of a situation. You look at people over there and facing that sort of thing.
- Q. It was really just trying to stay out of everybody's way. I think we did the same thing. How long was your tour over there a year? O.K. When we went over we knew the day we were coming back. It got to the point where all you were worried about was that ETS date.
- A. The people that lived on base there were fairly secure but at night you could see tracer fire. _____
- Q. We were fairly ruthless and they way your peasants, the VietCong really pulled some atrocities you said you saw the planes of napalm close to base. Were there very many times that they came that close to you?
- A. Yes. They almost got our bomb dump on one occasion and came up through the base. I remember that they almost came through two or three times.
- Q. How would you evaluate the way that President Reagan's handling these hot spots today? Do you think he should have sent Marines to Lebanon in the first place?
- A. I don't know, it sounded like a good idea in the first place, not knowing too much about the situation, I think he waited too long to pull them back out again, probably waited so long to, pull them back out again, probably again, that's another no win situation.
- Q. Well, really 2000 marines can't make that much of a difference. How about your attitude towards Vietnam, have you thought much about it since you've been back?
- A. Yes, quite a bit. It's a beautiful country, I would like to see it again, as time goes on the more I think about it, the more it seems to me more of a bad joke or bad dream.
- Q. Did you watch the TV series?
- A. Parts of it and I thought it was real good.
- Q. I think what was so good about it was the background information about how we first became involved. When you came home how were you treated personally?
- A. Well, people that knew me treated me like I never left I spent two years in South Carolina before I came back.
- Q. Well two years of duty left? In South Carolina?
- A. Yes. I felt like this drug thing you talked about and the fact that we weren't winning was tough. It turned a lot of people off. I felt like the restrictions some people just didn't want to admit it.
- Q. Do you think that was why people were so hard on us, I guess, just because we did lose, just that idea that we lost the war?
- A. I don't know. Everybody likes to win. I think some people feel that the soldier didn't do the best job that they could. If we didn't win somebody made a mistake.

- Q. Somebody's fault, of course, there's been a lot of criticisms of the strategy we used over there. We used search and destroy missions where you'd go out and clean out a village and then leave it, and they'd come back in, you really weren't gaining anything. Do you think there's anything we could have done that would have won the war?
- A. No. I don't think there was any chance. We might have won the war at the time, but _____ . The wars not over in Vietnam yet, they're still fighting with Cambodia and other countries, its different people, you're fighting a different battle. Even if we had won the war there still wouldn't be peace over there.
- Q. Well really they're still fighting in the south and are still fighting I guess. You came back and then you went to South Carolina and pulled two years down there, then you got discharged in 1971. Then what did you do?
- A. I came back to school.
- Q. Back to Morehead, you graduated in 1973? What was your degree in?
- A. Industrial Education.
- Q. Have you got a masters? When did you get it?
- A. I have two masters actually, one in vocational education. I finished in 1976 and another masters in education.
- Q. Where do you work now?
- A. Bureau for Social Services.
- Q. After you got out of Morehead, why did you decide to stay here?
- A. Well, I came back and I worked with Elmer Anderson while I was going to school and after I got out I got a job working in Owingsville and we stayed. We went to Indiana for two years then I came back to work on my masters degree in 1975, since then we stayed here, because the job I have is close by.
- Q. What did you do over in Owingsville?
- A. Worked at Manpower.
- Q. No doubt your degree helped you get a job, do you think so?
- A. Yes, I've been lucky in the area.
- Q. When you came back on campus in 1971, was there any unrest on campus, any demonstrations against the war?
- A. Not a great deal at Morehead. There were a few small things, nothing significant.
- Q. Did you live on campus?
- A. No.
- Q. Did you join any veterans organizations when you came back?
- A. I joined the vets club after I'd been back about 6 months.

Q. On campus? How about any of the other organizations, legions, or?
A. The American Legion probably when I was doing my graduate work.

Q. Have you ever taken part in any protest?

A. Yes. I was in Washington right after I got out of the service in South Carolina. It was the weekend before the big May demonstrations that they had all the trouble about.

Q. Was it anti-war?

A. About the Vietnam War, yes.

Q. You must have been up there about the same time as Dan Stewart do you know him?

A. Yes. He was there the next weekend when they were knocking heads.

Q. When did you get married?

A. 1973.

Q. Dr. Hanrahan's concerned that the Vietnam Veterans haven't gotten the recognition they deserve from those institutions that usually honor war veterans, like the University's. He's wanting to get some kind of plaque for the student center and maybe a permanent exhibition in the library, would you be in favor of that?

A. Yes. I agree that its over and the best thing to do would be ignore it.

Q. If this ever comes about he's planning a dedication ceremony for all the veterans who are alumni present.

