

Oral History Project: Alumni of Morehead State University and the Vietnam War

Interview with Dan P. Stewart, 1365 Knapp Ave., Morehead, Ky. 40351

Class of 19

Occupation:

Interviewer: Michael Downs

Date: 9/28/83

I. Family History

Q. What was your father's occupation?

A. He was a millwright by trade.

Q. How much education did he have?

A. One year of college.

Q. What was his income?

A. 15 to 20,000

Q. Were you a student when you entered the service?

A. No, I wasn't. I'd gone one year to Morehead State University and dropped out after that. I was actually working in a paper mill at the time I enlisted.

Q. Where was that?

A. Oxford Paper Company in West Carrollton, Ohio. I think it was Oxford Mining.

Q. What was your income at the time?

A. Probably \$12,000 a year tive or take a little.

Q. When you went into the service, were you drafted or did you join?

A. Enlisted.

Q. Why did you decide to enlist?

A. I just felt that I should, that I had an obligation to my country.

Q. Before you were sent overseas to Vietnam, had you ever heard anything about Vietnam?

A. Sure did. Thats the reason I enlisted, thought I'd like to go.

Q. What exactly was it that you heard about Vietnam?

A. Well of course I knew they were fighting the communist over there and trying to keep the country from being taken over by the communist. I would much rather fight the communist somewhere else as fight the communist here.

## II. Service Experience in Vietnam

Q. When you were in the service what was your MOS?

A. I was a 2531 field radio operator.

Q. When were you in Vietnam?

A. 1967.

Q. How long were you in Vietnam?

A. Thirteen months.

Q. What unit were you assigned to?

A. Third Battalion, third Marine Regiment, third Marine Division. I might add that I was with H&S Company.

Q. You said you were a radio operator, were you in a rifle platoon?

A. No, I was a battalion radio operator. I operated the radio primarily for the battalion operations and on the battalion company.

Q. Did you see any combat?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you ever wounded?

A. No, just broke my arms.

Q. While you were there did you form any opinions about the Vietnamese people themselves?

A. The Vietnamese people were a group of people who were proud, they wanted to be free. They were somewhat confused, some of these people were, and I speak primarily of the Montagnards. Of course I saw more primitive citizens of Vietnam, and they didn't have a full understanding of what was going on. But I think the average Vietnamese himself, did understand what was going on. Most people just wanted to be free to raise their rice, their families and go on about their business, they could care less about industry or anything of that nature.

Q. What about the Arvn's were you ever around them?

A. I did work with the Arvn's on numerous occasions. The Arvn's had a lot of inadequate weapons. I know one Arvn unit when they did receive the M 16 rifle you wouldn't believe that it was the same unit. They had weapons that would work, and they would work. You have to have something to fight with in order to be able to fight. And from having talked to other Marines who had served in Korea, they had compared the Arvn's as coming along as a South Korean. They said at one point in time they thought the Koreans were weaker than the Arvn's. Right now the South Korean Marines are considered to be some of the elite of the fighting forces of this world. We made them that way. We too could have stayed in South Vietnam and made them that way. Not to mention that South Vietnam is

probably one of the richer countries as far as natural resources. They have the potential also of raising enough rice to make out a delta area to feed all of Indo-China, if they had proper agricultural tools and things of this nature. They have oil, rubber, just about anything you can imagine. 346

Q. One of the arguments I've heard about why the Arvn's were such a poor troop, this has been generally pointed out that they had been fighting as an organized force only since about 1954 and they really weren't schooled to fight that way.

A. That's to some degree correct. They were coming along quite well. I looked at the thing to cease fire or not to cease fire when we signed the treaty. We recognized and tried to stay with the treaty cause we wanted out. The country wanted out as a whole. I know, as you saw as Vietnam fell the many tanks that were left standing, idle and helicopters, you have to look at those things. You have to have people trained to operate tanks and aircraft. Also, we were only at that time sending replacement parts or replacement vehicles. They might have had an aircraft that was down because they didn't have parts for it. They may also have not had enough adequate trained pilots for that aircraft. We let them down, we sure did.

Q. When you were over there were you aware that sentiment was changing?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Did you ever get any papers from home or anything like that?

A. Yes, I did. In fact when I came home I hated any sucker I saw that had long hair.

Q. What is your opinion of President Johnson?

A. Oh, I don't know. It would be hard to say. I think to some degree he tried to do the right things in Vietnam, and to some degree he did not. (Goldwater could have been elected President). He forgot to hide from the people what he would do in Vietnam. He said he would go over there and win that war. Put B-2's on them and things of this nature, and of course that's exactly what Johnson ended up doing. That just sounded better to the people than campaigns.

Q. What about President Nixon?

A. I think by the time President Nixon came along he was just going to break the back of Vietnam unto the point that they would go to the Peace table and negotiate. He did that also with the B-52's.

Q. By the time he took over the Policy was pretty much accepted.

A. The policy was accepted, they were coming out. They were just trying to find a method to come out. We lost 57,000 and some odd soldiers over there. Either killed or MIA's and it would be hard to even gauge how many thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese people were just slaughtered as North Vietnam took over South Vietnam. One of the things they did first of all when they came into each village or hamlet they would take over.

They put their school teachers to work immediately. Of course if you were a school teacher you were in a hazardous duty situation. You'd just about get killed. They wanted to get the indoctrination started immediately upon the kids.

Q. Why did we lose in Vietnam?

A. We lost in Vietnam because we were not allowed to fight the war. We had seemingly all the ground rules. The North Vietnamese did not have the ground rules. It goes back to the political aspect of the war. When you got to be concerned with the Mothers and Daddys' whispering about this and that, fearing their child going to war and in fact a lot of these folks would have influence; had money and things of this nature; a lot of political influence, and this is the thing that got back to our elected officials in Washington. These folks are running for office and of course they're going to try to stay in tune with what the general public is looking at and what they're wanting. For these reasons they kept our hands tied. I feel that they did and the only thing I can say about the way they let us fight that war, we're just lucky the North Vietnamese did not have the aircraft and artillery that we had, they would just flat kick their butts <sup>over</sup> big time.

Q. Let's get back for a minute to when you were in Vietnam, what was a typical day like for you?

A. Depended on the situation. A lot of the time we were in the Battalion CP. That would just be a matter of work on your bunker, stood radio watch at a particular shift. We had a thing over there for the first six months I was in Vietnam called Ho Chi Minh hour. Every morning at 7:00 we were mortared, from 7:00 to 7:30 just like clockwork. When you first got to Vietnam you were scared to death, then you kind of mellowed into a groove that you just went about your work and didn't think about it. When your friends would get killed and things of this nature, you would only get bitter and want to retaliate over that. Then, as you would start to get short and close to coming home, you would get like you first came there, scared to death that you weren't getting home. So I would say, all in all out of thirteen months, I probably spent 10½ to 11 months that I was just there doing a job and never even thought about if I was going to get killed that day or not get killed. I'm not saying there wasn't times I didn't get scared, cause there were a lot of times I got scared. It would be very comparable to a football game. I would refer say to a firefight when you're on a search and destroy operation, you walk around with butterflys in your stomach just like you would before a football game. Once you got into a firefight you just went ahead and played. You did your job and never thought about it until after it was over, and you sit back and try to analyze what had happened, your actions, and what you could have done to improve your actions, to assist better. During mortar attacks and things of this nature you just sat in a damned hole, scared to death, hoping somebody's not coming after you.

- Q. People don't realize that you were hardly ever in actual contact with the enemy. Most of the time, except when they might try to overrun a base, it was mostly hill and run in the field.
- A. It was a hit and run situation and a lot of times we would go to places that other units were in trouble, go in as a reactionary force. A lot of times you know where you were going and exactly what you were getting into. Hill 881 at Phu Son was such an incident, you knew when you went there what was going on. This would probably have been the spring of 1967. When we got there it was on and it turned into a battallion operation. Numerous occasions you did know where you were going and also you knew what to expect when you got there. The thing I think about 881, our battallion had just been given M 16's probably the week before and it is still amazing to me. We were given roughly 1100 bad M 16's. The rifles would jam. The chambers were so rough, for example, that the brass would not eject after the weapon had been fired. The ejection pins were so strong that a lot of times they would just go through the brass and I was amazed that in 1967 a bad lot of weapons reached Vietnam and got into a combat situation. As a result we did lose a lot of people. We had heavy casualties in my battallion. I thought how in the world can industry with the technology we had and the military being what it is, how in the world can they send inadequate weapons to Vietnam. I was, of course, referring to the fact that it's unthinkable that the government of this country would allow weapons that were inadequate to reach its combat troops. And also to allow troops to come into combat with a weapon that many of them had never fired before. They had seen pictures of it but did not know anything about the care and maintenance of this weapon. Then a week later you're in a combat situation where your life depends upon that weapon. Another situation I was really amazed about, as I was leaving Vietnam there was an order put out through our division that you had to have a combat emergency before you could fire the 81mm mortar. Somewhere along the line someone got the big idea that they would change the old cardboard, tarpaper container that the mortar round came in and would make a nice plastic tube that it would come in, that you could unscrew the lid and pull the round out. This was very handy once you used it, you could carry water in it, carry your C-rations in, or whatever. Someone forgot to check the fact that the heat and humidity in Vietnam and forgot to check the fact that this particular container would allow condensation to develop on the inside and get the increments wet. I saw a situation where they couldn't get a mortar round outside the perimeter. That's the reason it was a combat situation before you could fire, because you could shoot the hell out of your own people. I thought that was another good gesture of our technology and whoever's supposed to research those items before they release it to be used by the military. There was just numerous things like that, it was just amazing that it happened.
- Q. Did they ever go back to the old cardboard container?
- A. Oh yes, they had to go back.
- Q. Did you find that you developed some pretty close relationships over there?
- A. You most definitely did. When you live with people in that fashion and you rely on those people to help keep you alive, you develop a closeness that you're closer to those people than you've ever been to brothers and sisters or your parents or wife or anyone. You know everything there is to know about them and they know everything there is to know about you. It's definitely a close situation. At the same time when a guy would possibly get killed or something, you didn't sit around and cry because you lost your best friend. You just got a little bit about the situation and went on. I once carried a fellow for about an hour trying to get him to an aid station. I guess the guy was dead when I picked him up. Still I didn't believe he was, but he was. He was close and I cared.

III. Back Home

Q. When you came home did you need any medical treatment?

A. No.

Q. How did others treat you?

A. I was treated just fine.

Q. A lot of Vietnam Veterans say they didn't get any recognition when they came back. Did you ever want anything like that?

A. No, I don't think we needed any recognition. We'd done no more than what they'd done in the Korean War. We just became a group of people just like the others, we just joined the civilian population again. We were a group of people who had done what we thought was right for our country.

Q. When you came back then, your attitudes and opinions were about the same as when you went over, you weren't disillusioned or anything?

A. No, I was not bitter, if I was bitter at all I was bitter because of the politics involved in the war. Also, I was bitter somewhat against the particular people I knew that had evaded the draft or evaded the war in one fashion or another. As I said, for a long time I couldn't accept seeing anybody with long hair and things of this nature, I just didn't feel those people were patriotic to their country. This is the attitude I had developed from what I had read in the paper. Cause every time I saw someone demonstrating against the war it was always the longhaired folks. Probably was a bad situation I allowed myself to get into. I was labeling anyone who had long hair in any degree whatsoever as a damn draft dodger. From that standpoint I was bitter.

Q. That opinion was prevalent at that time...

A. I think it was.

Q. When did you start into Morehead after you got out of the army?

A. I came back out of the Marine Corp, I didn't start back to college until 1975, the spring semester. I didn't feel until that time that I was ready to come back to college. I originally left college because I didn't feel that I was prepared to go to college mentally. I'm not speaking, I didn't have the intelligence to go, I just wasn't ready to go to school. When I was freshman the parents said you should go to college and I went to college. I didn't need to be in college yet, because I had not yet made up my mind as to what I wanted to do in life.

Q. When you came back to Morehead did you ever join any kind of Veterans organization?

A. Well, I belonged to the American Legion. I joined the American Legion the day after I came home from Vietnam, or the day after I was discharged. I did belong to the Veterans club on campus. I am also a member of VFW, I should past member because we don't have a club locally.

others that will always be followers, and that's all they're ever going to be. That's just the way life is in general, and the military as well. You have to have your quota of those people who will make good NCO's, good officers. Now, we're not hurting I don't think as far as officers, because the officers, most of them are going through ROTC or something of that nature. Some type of formal education process. Military is getting a lot of people now just for the sake that they cannot find jobs. I just believe that we are hurting in the ranks as far as NCO's and things of this nature.

Q. It does represent a true cross-section of the country...

A. Exactly. A true cross-section of the people as far as the people with formal education and the people requiring a high school type education. I'm not advocating that everyone should have a formal education, it has nothing to do with that, I just think that the people who are in a position to pursue life and to make something out of life for themselves regardless of whether they have a college degree or not, they are going to go out and find themselves a good trade, they will work, they will do well. And some of these other folks are just the type of folks that are not going to pursue that much in trying to get themselves employed, and try to upgrade their life: Standards and things of this nature. They're just content to be in the groove they're in.

Q. Do you think that we're as patriotic a country as we used to be?

A. I believe the patriotism of the country is being restored. I think for a period of time that people were not as patriotic as they should be. I believe after the Iran situation, is when people began to become patriotic again as a whole. I also believe that if President Carter at that time had invaded Iran he would have had the total support of all the people of this country. I believe that sometime in the future we will be involved in some type of a conflict, in some fashion. The world also has to be told that they're not just going to run over the United States as they have done in times past.

Q. How do you feel about the way President Reagan is handling some of the situations in the world today, such as El Salvador and Lebanon?

A. I think he's handling it quite well. We're going back to the same type of situation, not the same situation as Vietnam, but the same type of things that's happening in those countries. You have communist factions that are trying to take those countries over. And again, let me re-emphasize, I would much rather fight the communist on some other soil than the American soil. If we don't help these other countries they're going to become communist as well and they're going to be after us. Somewhere we have to stop the people before they get here. There's enough of them already here.

Q. As far as the marines in Lebanon right now, do you think they're placing some of the same restrictions on them?

A. They definitely do have restrictions. Of course they're over there on patrol action, peace keeping action within the United Nations. It's just a matter of time I think until the Marines need to be unleashed. Of course they are fighting back now. You can't just sit in a fortified position and let everybody just knock the hell out of you. You've got to retaliate. I think they're doing that from what I see in the news media and what have you.

Q. What about the role of the United States in the world today? Can we still be a policing force anymore or has that time gone?

A. I don't think that we have ever actually been a policing force for the world. We have to look at all these other countries who are assisting. I have mixed emotions about the United Nations, but I think through the United Nations we are trying to assist other countries in the police action. We're not totally doing it ourselves. As large as we are and as populated as we are, we sometimes tend to have more troops and equipment committed to a situation such as El Salvador or Lebanon or what have you. Because of our force we will never ever in this world be able to be a neutral country. We are one of the big countries, one of the big powers. We are rich in everything that everybody else would like to be rich in. The only way we're going to keep neutral to any extent is in having our military forces up to par to a point that nobody's going to mess with us.

Q. Do you believe in a strong military?

A. I most certainly do. Your best offense is a good defense.

Q. Do you believe President Reagan is doing the right thing?

A. Yes he is.

Q. Did you understand then why the U.S. was fighting in Vietnam?

A. I believe we fought in Vietnam...the purpose was the always the same in my opinion, and that was to defeat communist and assist other countries in remaining free.

Q. Has your opinion changed any since you've been back?

A. The only thing changed, as far as my thinking on Vietnam would be the political side of Vietnam. You cannot fight a war with politics involved in it. It was costly in lives and things of this nature, when you go into war, and its necessary that we do from time to time, you don't need to worry about which Senator or Congressman is going to be re-elected. Or who's going to be elected for President. We need to go in there and do the job and get ourselves out. When we do get into a war situation, we should use all the resources afforded to our military forces. Not go in there hap hazardly and only utilize the ground troops.



Q. Its like a lot of people think the military had their hands tied...

A. The military did have their hands tied, I know when I was in Vietnam I spent all of my time in the DMZ. There was a six to eight month period of time when we did not have any B 52 strikes. Period. That was because of public opinion back here, that it was inhumane and what have you.

Q. Have you ever taken part in any kind of a protest or anything like that?

A. No, I haven't. I didn't take part in a protest but I did have the opportunity to be in Washington D.C. as they had the last Anti-War demonstration. I got to turn a lot of their tables over, with their pamphlets and things, which I enjoyed. I think I was the only guy there wearing a burr haircut, white tee shirt and levi's.

Q. What is your view on the draft as opposed to the volunteer army?

I believe the draft should be restored. The reason behind that is, I'm now in the Army reserves, I belong to the forehead reserve unit. I'm a tank commander. We're part of a trained division. We spend our annual training at Fort Knox, KY. training troops. I have looked at the military as it is today, they're not getting the "cross" of people that they need. Before with the draft, you would get some people who would be followers, you'd get people who were going to be leaders, anything you do in life they're particular people who will be in positions and who are geared mentally to to be the leaders.

Q. What do you think the outlook is for the future of the country?

A. I want to think that our country is going to just continue to be the best country in the world. We have faults but we still have the best thing going as compared to any other country. I just want the United States to remain free as it is and stay that way, if our own constitution doesn't get in our way in some fashion. I believe that we have all the people that we can take into this country right now. Somewhere along the line things are going to have to be changed so we just don't take the unwanted population of the rest of the world. We've got to worry about our own people that we've got here. I believe that we've got plenty of people. I hope the next time we have a conflict the politicians let the military do their job and not worry about getting re-elected. When you drag out a thing like that and hold the military back and do not afford the military the right to utilize what they have available to them, then you are in a situation where you're gonna cost more American lives. We need to go on and just get the job done. No one likes war, its very unpleasant. But its obvious history has said this will happen, and it will happen. So if we're gonna do it, let's do it and help the people we're gonna help and not just go in there and get the people started on the right track and turn tails and run and leave them to the enemy, the communist.

Q. Do you think Morehead State University gave you a well-rounded education?

A. I think so. When I came back to college I was older and quite a bit wiser and I'm sure I didn't get any more intelligent, just got a lot of experience. I found it to be no problem whatsoever, as for wanting to return to college. I'll never forget when I walked into registration, when I left registration was held in Botton Auditorium in what is now the drill room for ROTC. When I walked into Laughlin Health I said " Well hell, I'll never get through here. But I enjoyed it. Well, in certain cases it was somewhat difficult. Particularly math class for example, if its modern math and things of this nature. I admit I'd say, "What in the hell is that!" Of course you're sitting in here with a group of kids who just got out of high school and its nothing to them. They've been exposed to this and ypu hadn't.

Q. Do you think your degree helped you as far as employment is concerned?

A. Well, I've been a person that I've never had a problem with employment. I just felt like if you wanted to work you'd always be able to find a job. In geving a job I could appreciate, it definitely helped. There's a difference in just going to work and punching a time clock and doing a particular job over and over and now having a job and a particular responsibility working under the mayor that I enjoy. I answer to the public and I work with the public. It's a very meaningfull job to me, much more meaningfull than driving a truck ever had been or anything such as that. I think you have to work in a position where you feel like you're accomplishing something and making a contribution to society itself. Of course with a formal education I am now doing that.