YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam

Personal Experience

O.H. 1034

JOHN R. FABIAN

Interviewed

by

Michael J. Lowry

on

January 22, 1983

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN R. FABIAN

INTERVIEWER: Michael J. Lowry

SUBJECT: Combat, anti-war movement, delayed stress

DATE: January 22, 1983

A: This is an interview with John Robert Fabian for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam Project, by Michael J. Lowry, on January 22, 1983, at 1180 Roberts Avenue, G-3, Warren, Ohio.

What unit were you attached to?

F: First Air Cav.

L: What years were you there?

F: I was there in 1969 and 1970.

L: Did you volunteer to go to Nam?

F: No.

L: Drafted?

F: No, I volunteered for the service. I had gotten drafted. I was going to college at the time. I got drafted, so I figured I might as well enlist and maybe get something that I could use later on. I signed up to be a commercial illustrator. That lasted all the way on the train, from Youngstown to Cleveland. I got to Cleveland and I was, from there on, an infantryman, after my tests.

L: How come you couldn't get a deferment, since you were going to school?

F: Well, my grade point dropped. I was goofing off, and I

dropped from a 3.2 to a 2.3. At that time, anything below a 2.7, you were gone, so they got me.

L: Did you have any feeling that there was a need for involvement? That it was your duty to go to Vietnam?

F: Yes, I guess I was kind of caught up in the Kennedy era, you know, for God and country and that sort of thing. My father was in the Marine Corps and my step-father was in the Army. So--you know, they were World War II, Korea vintage people. I thought it would be the honorable thing to do. I was against protesting and anti-war demonstrations, things like that, although I wasn't pro-war. I was kind of like in the middle. That's the way I felt when I first got in there.

L: Have your feelings changed since you got drafted?

F: I was eighteen going on nineteen when I went in the service. Like I said, I was caught up in the Kennedy era. As things progressed, my training in the Army just seemed to be surrounded about a "kill" philosophy. That's all that we were taught to do was to kill, from the time you woke up in the morning to the time you went to be at night. Then, they'd wake you up three or four times during the night, just to see if you remembered what you're supposed to kill. The whole thing was centered. . . .

L: What would you say was the most memorable experience that you had, positive or negative, while you were in the country?

F: To single out one experience would be a combat situation that I was in. [It was that] I had a very good, a very, very good friend, that had gotten killed, and the way he had gotten killed. I've simply been kind of suffering all these years since I came home. We were pulling a mission in Cambodia when we weren't even supposed to be in Cambodia. It was supposed to be a high LZ that we were going into, and the choppers had just set us down. You couldn't hear anything, not a bird, not any bushes, nothing. I kind of figured there were a bunch of gooks down there. We ran into contact, and this buddy of mine got killed.

But, you know, we managed to get out of there. We had one ARVN that was killed. One GI was killed, and I was wounded. One other guy was wounded. One guy didn't get hurt at all. We had to run for about three miles through the jungle to get them out of there. We had

repelled in off of the choppers. The only way to get out was by rope, again, wire them up. I was carrying what was left of my buddy. When we finally did get to a place that we could get out, another guy, more or less, forced me to let go of what was left of my friend. He had taken the RPG in the chest area, up here. That just literally tore his whole front off. There was absolutely nothing left but the back, his ribs, and his spine. His face was gone. It was just a total mess. I guess I kind of felt responsible for that because I had ordered him to cover a certain area. We were taking fire. We had just gotten out of a small clearing, moved into the bush, and we set up, established radio contact. I could hear them moving in. They were moving in from three sides. We only had five men, so the only way to deploy the men was to cover a circular area. One of the guys on this particular mission was a new guy, FNG, and then, this big Black guy, big chickenshit dude, mostly. We moved into an area where there was a log, kind of like in almost a "T," an inverted "T" like this. So, we had something to cover us.

Anyhow, the black guy was supposed to have been covering his field of fire. He was laying down beside the log. That's when we started taking fire. Anyhow, I ordered this friend of mine, Bill, over to his area. When he got up to move over to that area . . . I guess he kind of lost it too, man, because he kind of played John Wayne, all of a sudden. He stood straight up, and we were taking fire from three sides. All you could hear were guns going off and bullets zooming past your head. Anyhow, he got up and moved about four steps over to the end of this tree. He was spraying out bullets with an M-16. I saw a gook, out of the corner of my eye, jump up and through an RPG. The flash from when the RPG took off, and the impact, there was no way that I could warn him to get down. It just just took him there.

L: What effect has this had, since that experience, since you got back home?

F: Well, until about two weeks ago, I had never told anyone of this particular experience. Now, I'm seeing a counselor for delayed stress. I told him about two weeks ago. It's the first time I've told anybody about that. In fact, you are the second person I've told. The effect it's had on me since the war is lack of concentration, not able to complete anything I begin, fits of rage and anger, a lot of hostility, pent-up frustrations. I've been into drugs. I've been into alcohol. I've been into just about everything to try to

get rid of a lot of old memories. I had nightmares, a lot of years of flashbacks, no friends. My wife and I have been separated about once a year for the past eleven years. More or less, I'm not able to hold down a job. I've had probably fourteen, fifteen different jobs since I got home. My life has just been a shambles since then.

L: Do you attribute any of this to the fact that you never had a chance to cool off once you came out? You were home in thirty-six hours.

F: Definitely. I've talked to other guys who had time left when they came home, where you've got kind of like a "break-in" period, because they went right back to a military installation, which is still governed by the military men. You can slowly get back into civilian life.

Life back here in the States was a real bitch when I came home. I mean, I got spit on in the airport in LA. I ended up getting into a fight and got arrested. That was two hours after I got discharged. Anti-war protestors were, man, everywhere. If you even looked like you were in the service, you were considered a baby-killer, the whole nine yards. Maybe I did kill a few babies. I don't know if I did or didn't. But still, I didn't, in a way, feel responsible for what I did. But, I don't feel that anyone back here, not knowing what we went through, had any right to force their opinions on us.

L: Do you think the Army should have given a cooling-off period, a time to de-program you from everything that happened over there?

F: Definitely. That's why VA hospitals are filled up with so many psychotics now.

L: There's no way to separate the two experiences when you're just thrown back into society again?

F: That's exactly the way it was. I came home--I left the war. That morning in Phu Bien, the day that . . . , we were taking incoming. I got off the truck. . . . Well anyhow, within probably six hours, I was on a plane for the States. We just went from one experience where you're getting shot at and killed and anything. You could do anything you wanted, just as long as you were in the field. Then, all of a sudden, to be put into society where all the things that you were trained to

do, you weren't allowed to do anymore. If somebody gave you a bunch of shit in Nam, you'd blow him away. someone gives you a bunch of shit around here, you end up in a fight and one or both of you get thrown into jail. I feel, anyway, that the guys definitely needed time to get themselves together. If they were going to go home, let them go home for thirty days, but bring them back in someplace where at least they have six months to adjust, to find out what's happening here in the States. I don't know if you're aware of it, but while we were in Vietnam, everything that was happening back here in the States was kept from us. The only information that we got, true and accurate information, was written from home. Some of the letters were opened; some of them were gone through. The only newspaper we got was the Stars and Stripes, and that was all full of glib and bullshit anyway. What was actually happening, as far as the war goes, we didn't know. All we knew about was our own little area.

L: They kept you contained?

F: Yes.

L: Do you think they didn't want you to know that there were people against the war?

F: Definately, because in 1969 and 1970, a lot of guys were getting smart. A lot of guys that didn't believe in the war were being drafted. Rather than risk going AWOL and running--which a lot of guys did do--they went ahead and went through their tour. Their attitudes and opinions never changed about the war. The only reason they were there--one guy in particular, a friend of mine name Lyle Gamen, he's from Portland, Oregon--was anti-war all the way. The only reason he did what he did in Vietnam was to keep from getting killed himself. The object of the game was to make it through, to survive. You did whatever you had to do to survive.

L: You've already discussed some of the things about the anti-war movement. Does this pile on top of everything else, the people against the war? Were you against the anti-war movement, or were you against the people in the anti-war movement who blamed the war on the vet?

F: I was against the people who blamed the war on the vet. I didn't start the war. I was there just like everybody else, doing my time and hopefully make it through and get back home. Yes, I did what I had to do, like I said, to survive. People forcing their opinions on me

when I came back, I didn't hold much for them. I didn't hold for it in Vietnam, and I'm not going to hold for it here. It's not that I was against the movement or against the people, but when it affected me personally, I was against it. I went right from the war and right back into college. In fact, I started fall semester that year, 1970. It was so much different. I felt older than most of the people that I went to class with. I always felt estranged. I was different than they were, and they knew it. I, more or less, separated myself from everybody and everything. I can't hold it against the people, the individual people, but rather all the. . . .

L: Do you feel that you've been treated fairly by the government?

F: No.

L: Does that include the American people, too?

F: Yes.

L: How do you perceive all this?

F: First of all, the government had no empathy at all for us. Through the years, I've been kind of trying to put things together, the lies and the violence and the words. It seems to me that it was like a big, political, chess game. Economically, the United States had to do something. We were desparate. The government as a whole was desperately trying to figure a way out of the financial mess they'd put themselves in, which is what's happening right now. Their way at that time was a nice little war in Southeast Asia. [It was] far enough away from the United States that this country wouldn't be hurt, but yet, economically, put a lot of people to work. The steel mills were going great guns, ammunition factories, tank factories, all that stuff. Supplies were coming in every day. It seemed to me the only people that got rich were the only people that liked what was happening, were the people that were here. They were working during that time. They were making the big bucks. The unions got stronger then. The money got bigger, the whole nine yards. I think the United States did that, and expended 58,000 lives for no reason at all.

L: Just to make somebody else rich?

F: Right.

L: The people that the guy over there died for, that were getting rich, when you came back they didn't want anything to do with you?

F: Exactly. In fact, we were treated . . . I don't know how many times I got pulled over. The first thing I did when I got home--the day after I got home--I went out and bought a brand new car. I did a little dealing in the black market over there, and I had enough money that I could go buy a car. I bought a brand new car, and it had to be red. It had to have black interior. It was what I called my "Bloodmobile," because I bought it with blood money. For probably six years after I came home, every car that I got was red. This is how screwed up I was.

I was always getting pulled over by the police. I don't know how they even knew I was a vet, but they always pulled me over. At that time, search and seizure was the number one rule. They stopped you, get you out of the car, do a body search on you, search your car for drugs or whatever, or weapons. Everybody was considered a mental case, and they all thought that we were schizoids or something; I don't know. I got into drugs a little bit. I smoked some pot here and there, but I never got into anything heavy, like a heroin addict or something that I would go out and kill people for. Just the treatment in general from everyone, including my family, was like they were just waiting for me to go off the deep end. Nobody trusted me at all. There again, you didn't have any trust for anyone else because they were always. . . .

L: Do you think the media gave this distorted view? They came out with . . . first a big stink about My Lai. That was on the news every day for two months.

F: I think they did. That was over-publicized. Again, I think that came directly from the government. It wasn't Calley's place to take the brunt of punishment for the entire Vietnam War. Maybe what he did on that particular mission wasn't right, and maybe it was. Nobody else was there. If somebody took fire in a village and I was there, the village would be gone. I don't give a shit who was in there. As long as you're going to kill me, I'm going to kill you first. That's probably the way he felt. That was the way they trained us to feel. We weren't people, we were robots. We were, like I told you, the training that we went through was that you didn't have time to think about what the moral issues were. The issue was to kill or be killed,

and survive. That's what it was. The same thing with him. Everybody started putting shit on him, man, I mean that guy, he took it from all of them. Because of the bad publicity that he had, the rest of us kind of got it. Applying for a job being a Vietnam veteran is like . . . I kind of like to keep it quiet, you know. "Are you in the Army?" "No." "Were you in the Army?" "No." I used to lie on applications, so they wouldn't find out, because then they start thinking, "This guy's nuts." Maybe we are, but it's this country that made us this way.

L: Do you think they used Calley as a scapegoat?

F: Definitely.

L: One guy told me it's a chain of command and Calley got his orders from higher up, and they let him take the fall.

F: Well, the way it goes is, the higher echelon is--I've never seen anybody higher than a captain in the field. I mean in the field. Captains get their orders from the majors, and the majors get theirs from lieutenant-colonels. Lieutenant-colonels get theirs from the colonels, colonels the generals, and on and on and on. Yet, every time that we were ordered to do something, it was for someone else to get another ribbon on his chest or a feather in his hat, to help him get promoted up in the ranks, to help his political-oriented goals. That's what it was.

L: They needed the combat ribbon to get . . . like, a lieutenant-colonel might need a combat ribbon just to get to a colonel.

F: Right.

L: So many days in the field, by telling other people to do it, he's going. . . .

F: Because the war was based on a kill ratio, a body count thing. That's how they figured whether they were doing good or whether they were doing bad, was on how many bodies that we killed or how many people we killed that particular day. That's how these guys were awarded their decorations. I stop to think now, I was awarded a silver star in Vietnam. I had quite a few decorations, which was sheer insanity. I assure you of that!

Anyhow, I stop to think now, seeing some of the generals and colonels and lieutenant-colonels and majors that I saw after I came home from the war, who have a chest full of ribbons. I know goddamn well I didn't see any of those assholes out there in the bush. So, how did they get their ribbons? It's all paperwork from somebody else blowing somebody else away, so they could get a medal.

L: What rank were you?

F: Sergeant.

L: They're putting out movies like The Deerhunter and Coming Home, Apocalypse Now, and on and on and on, infinitum, on Vietnam. How do you view these? For instance, did you see Apocalypse Now?

F: No.

L: Have you seen any of these?

F: I watched Coming Home. It's probably the first movie on Vietnam I've watched. I watched it a few months ago on T.V. It has been thirteen years since the war, since I came home, and I have never been able to watch one. That particular movie, I thought, was good. I could see what they were trying to do, which was to point out how he felt, also how his wife felt, and also how this paralyzed vet felt. He was able to gain control of his life, because he had time to cool off. He was in a VA hospital feeling sorry for himself for two, three years before he finally got out on the streets. He had time to think about this shit. I thought it was a good movie. I felt that the way it was portrayed gave everyone a good view of the way the war was for us.

L: Instead of the Green Berets with John Wayne, you know, gung-ho Americans.

F: Right. That's typical. In fact, I would think that the United States probably had some money in that film.

L: Yeah.

F: Because that's the kind of hero-worship that they wanted people to see then. "Let's all go to the Army and be a Green Beret." That's fine and dandy. Doing all those things is a lot of fun, but when you're doing them in combat, it's a whole different story. You know, being Mr. Macho is kind of neat for awhile, but when you've

got to live your entire life like that, it's not.

L: The media's portrayal was a body count, number one. Every night CBS Evening News, Walter Cronkite would say, "Today, 200 VC and 20 Americans died." That's what you saw every night on the tube. Then, like I said, they spread My Lai on teh set for two or three weeks, two or three months, really. When you came home, did you catch a lot of shit for that?

F: I refused to watch the TV when I came home. If there was anything on about the goddamn war, I didn't watch it. I didn't listen to any news reports. I didn't read any newspapers. In fact, I didn't even write letters to my buddies that I had left back there. I didn't want anything to do with that war. The first thing someone asks, "How many people did you kill?" Well, "How many people did you kill?" Automatically, I would take the defensive. I'm not proud of what I did at all, but I had my own reasons for it. Like I said, it just got to the point where the whole thing was crazy. It's like one big insane asylum, and the object was to get the hell out of there, do anything you had to do to get out. I feel that we did take the brunt of it. We bear a lot of the responsibility for the kill ratio. Like I said, the whole war was centered around that as to whether the United States was doing okay or not doing okay, depending on how many bodies they had that day.

L: How about the support factor? The American people weren't behind the war and you're over there dying for something that nobody else really believes in. That has to cause a lot of hurt and pain.

F: Yeah, it does. The reason that I feel that way is because, like I said, when I first got into the service, I felt I was doing something right. It turned out to be the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. No support whatsoever from anyone. Like I said, the information that we got from back home was what the government and the Army wanted us to hear. If we had letters that had anything derogatory about our government or about the war effort, it was taken out. You didn't get that letter. There were a lot of things that people had written to me, newspaper clippings and things like that, that I never received.

So, we were kind of kept in the dark, and then, when we got home, man, it was like a big bomb exploded, like the kid that hit me in the airport for no reason at all! I'm walking through the airport trying to get a grip on

things. There were a lot of things that happened that year. I mean neat things, like bars in the airport, you know, round-eyed women, just getting off on checking other people out and stuff. I'm walking around through the airport, and a couple of what I called hippies then walked by me. The kid spit right on me. I had my uniform on. Naturally, I took a fit. I hit him and knocked him into a fountain. I don't know, man. . . . It was stupid, what I did, but it was even dumber what he did. If I had to do it all over again, I'd probably do the same thing, if someone were to do it to me now. I'd probably do it again. So, I don't really know how to answer that.

L: The government got into this war, really, in 1945; and they got themselves so deep into it financially by supporting the French, and finally by supporting Diem, and pouring all these millions of dollars in. Does that make you feel used?

F: I feel like somebody's whore. You know, at least a hooker, a prostitute, gets paid for what they do. I got nothing but shit on, abused. The government didn't want to do anything for us, until recently. Especially then. It was all so useless, because it was all so new to me. It's kind of old now, but sometimes I feel as though I'm right there. We were all used. Not just me, but even the guys that got into the war towards the end, in 1971 and 1972, were used. Political ambassadors to Vietnam were used. Everyone was used by someone here in the States, whether it be our president or whoever supports him. . . . It's hard to say who runs the government. If it's the big corporations that run the government . . . I think the big corporations run the government.

L: In World War II, you had a clear cut justification for the war. It was an aggressive war waged by Nazi Germany and Japan. They crossed the line and invaded South Korea, so you could justify it as an aggressive war. In Vietnam, there was no real crossing of anything. You couldn't really see it. It was a civil war. Did that lack of justification hurt the war effort?

F: Definitely. We couldn't justify anything over there. The South Vietnamese didn't want to wage war against their own country. They could care less. The only people that were into the war effort were your captains and your majors and your colonels; and the only reason they were in it was for their own self-gains. There was no justification for it at all. Like I said, at first I thought there was. In South Vietnam, this poor little

Asian country, we have to stop Communism. Let's keep it in North Vietnam, like another Korea. These people didn't care whether they were Communist or had a democratic society. They didn't care about anything. All they wanted was to be left alone to grow their rice and raise their families and not to have all these bombs and shit going off all over the place, not to have their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers killed for nothing. That's all they wanted.

L: We came in and we said, "This is the way we're going to do it, whether you like it or not."

F: Right. We trained their soldiers according to our techniques. We left South Vietnam with one of the best equipped armies of our day. Yet, they lacked the self-confidence that they needed to win their war, because they didn't care. "Ngyuh du Vien Thieu," means "Where the hell is he?" The President of South Vietnam, here he takes all these millions and millions of dollars in gold bullion and goes off to some little Caribbean island somewhere. I don't even know where the asshole is now. I'll tell you one thing; I'll bet he aint in a food stamp line.

L: And, we let the corruption go on?

F: Exactly.

L: And, supported the wrong people?

F: Right.

L: You have a problem in guerilla war of discovering who your enemy is. You can't see your enemy. You can't hear him, and hell, for all you know, the five-year-old kid that's standing right next to you could be the enemy too. What problems does that place on you?

F: Well, we just didn't know who the enemy was. Like you said, it could be anybody. I've seen North Vietnamese regulars training ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen-year-old kids in 1970, to kill us! I saw old ladies and old men carrying bicycles with weapons and grenades and whatever they were carrying through the jungle. That's their source of supplies. That's how they supplied each other.

You know, they all kind of stuck together. It seemed the Communists had a goal. They had a purpose. Whatever it took to get there, that's what they did.

They used all different kinds of people. There was no difference between the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese to me, except who had the most money, "What am I going to get for this?" You might have a guy scrubbing down your living quarters one day, and that same night he'd be firing mortars at you. So, as far as I'm concerned, if they had slanted eyes, they were the enemy. I didn't care for the South Vietnamese any more than I did for the North Vietnamese.

L: Because you never knew?

F: Yeah.

L: Do you think that their sense of direction, Ho's sense, Giup's sense of direction toward an objective or goal, helped them because we didn't have a sense of direction? We didn't know where we were going?

F: Absolutely. Their sense of direction was to completely invade the South. The biggest thing they had to do was to take over the provincial capitols and eventually get to Saigon, which is what they did, and the war was ended. Whereas us, to me it was so stupid, because we could have won that war so many times. You know, if we had gone on line and had continued to push north and push those assholes all the way to the Gulf of Tonkin, if we had to, into the China Sea, we would have won. If we would have fought that war like we did Japan, or like we did Germany, or even like we did part of the Korean War, we would have won. As it was, the only way that we won was by the kill ratio, body counts. That's the only way that you knew you won. I spent missions where I'd do a mission one week in an area, spend five to seven days out there, find out what was out there, come back and let them know. They'd send a company of grunts out there to take care of whatever was there, bring them back, and the goddamn gooks would be back in the same place again?

L: They never held on to the terrain that they fought for?

F: No.

L: That's the idea of not gaining ground, of not making a stronghold, taking anything.

F: It was effortless.

L: Yeah, it was. . . .

F: Well no, I can't say effortless. They put us there to see how many people we could get killed or kill. Then, when we were done and they felt the enemy had left, they pulled back and the enemy would come back again. Do you know how many firebases we dug out in the middle of nowhere, man? You went in jungles like triple canopy, and you build hooches. You fill sand bags, and you dig trenches. You lay consentine wire, and you spend a month there. Then, they bring in a bunch of choppers, and they haul everybody out. And, the gooks take it over.

The Vietnamese were very ingenious people. They used to make bombs out of C-ration cans, mines. Everything we left in the field, they'd use for something. It was ironic that just every time they'd put us somewhere, we were, more or less, a supply line to the North Vietnamese.

L: You said that we should've walked in and walked up the country and just knocked the hell out of them. Do you really think that's possible in that kind of a war?

F: Yeah, definitely possible. With the type of equipment that we had at the time. Now let me tell you, even with the terrain in Vietnam--you go from a flat, almost completely watered country to some of the most treacherous mountains in the world. We had been in Italy. We scaled the Alps to get to Germany. We went through Switzerland. I mean, if we could go through that, why didn't we do it in Vietnam? So the terrain was not, I don't think, a problem as far as winning the war. The object was not to win the war, but to make money each year that they were involved.

L: And, as soon as that became unprofitable, we withdrew.

F: Right.

L: What about the unpredictability of the enemy? You sit and you wait and wait and wait; and then, all of a sudden, they hit you with everything they've got.

F: That definately caused a lot of stress. Sometimes, you would get hit with just light weapons, just some automatic fire. Other times, you'd get everything. I'll tell you what, like I said, they used to haul anti-aircraft guns, all their equipment was more or less hauled around on bicycles. When they wanted to hit you good, they'd hit you good. But, you never knew what was there. The kind of stress that you were under all the

time, once in awhile you might take two or three rockets on an incoming attack. Another time, you might take it all night long. There was never any patterns.

L: You never knew what they were going to do, and you just sat there scared shitless?

F: That's it. "Is my number up today? Am I going to make it today, or not?"

L: And, they leave you hanging there? I don't know how you operated, but a lot of guys said you weren't allowed to fire. Even if you knew there was somebody out on the line, you couldn't fire.

F: We were an airborn ranger company. We pulled LURP missions. Our mission was to find and capture enemy POWs and/or documents. To see what was out there, get the information that was needed, and bring it back to the rear. Whatever we had to do to do that, we did. I brought back a lot of POWs. I brought back a lot of documents. I set up ambushes to just kill people, just to see what we could get off their bodies. Sometimes, you get lucky; sometimes, you don't. They'd do the same thing for us.

L: What about the use of booby traps?

F: I saw a few booby traps in Vietnam. Again, one of the movies like The Green Berets. . . . the medi kind of made the public believe that everywhere you went in Vietnam you saw this sort of thing. It wasn't everywhere. Once in awhile you did; once in awhile you didn't. Most of the booby traps and stuff were done by Viet Cong, not by NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. The Viet Cong were South Vietnamese Communists, and they didn't care one way or the other. As long as they were paid their piasta, they'd do whatever. Whoever had the bucks.

And, that's the way the Communists had infiltrated the South. When our country got there, these people were all farmers. Saigon, towards the end of the war, was like another Paris. Everybody had their little shops set up and the name of the game was to make money. Little kids selling lighters, and hookers on the street corners. We changed that country. They didn't change. We changed them. In fact, we brought what we consider western civilization to an oriental country that didn't want it. When they saw the value of money, they started getting fired up. Now, look what Japan has done since

the war. They're probably the strongest economic country in the world today.

L: And, we did that?

F: Yes.

L: Was there any tension between the officers and the enlisted men?

F: Oh, yes. Like I said, the enlisted men were pawns. The officers were knights and bishops. The generals were kings and queens. It was a big chess game. Nobody wanted to get killed just so somebody else could get a medal. A lot of times that's what they did, the officers in the field maybe stayed in the field for three to six months. Most of the time three months. Then, they drossed out. Then, they got a job in the rear. When a grunt walked into the field, he was in the goddamn field for a year. That's where he stayed. We weren't allowed to, every three months, come back to the rear and just sit down behind a desk somewhere, and hit all the NCO clubs and officer's clubs and bars and shit. There was a big difference between an officer and an enlisted man. The officers got all the good stuff, and we got all the shit. They got the Budweiser. We got the Schlitz with the black label. It's even the same today.

There was a lot of tension between them because they were using us to further their careers, especially a lifer. A lot of the, what they call ninety-day wonders, butterballers that come up and go to officer's candidate school down in Fort Benning, Georgia, and they [the government] filled their heads through a whole bunch of bullshit, "For God and country," and "If you make captain, when you come home next year from Vietnam, then you are going to have a good career in the Army." These guys bought it hook, line, and sinker. I was offered OCS, and I told them to stick it up their ass.

L: Butterball, is that first lieutenant?

F: Second.

L: Second Lieutenant. How much effect did this have on the way that you operated, the way the war operated?

F: Well, speaking from a LURP, we didn't have officers in the field, I would think not. We had a couple, you know, XO's, executive officers, that wanted to go to the

field with our teams. I would never take them with me. You couldn't trust them. They were worse than some niggers.

I'll never be able to replace the years that I should have been back here growing up, learning how to love and to be loved, to become a working part of our society as we know it. I spent my time learning how to kill, not to be anything more than a machine. Today, that's why so many Vietnam veterans have so many problems, marital problems, because they don't know how to treat a woman, how to treat their wives. That's why so many of them have been re-married four, five, or six times. Fortunately, I've only been married once. If this one ends, I doubt if I'd ever do it again.

The years that I should have been picking up on how to treat people, specifically women, I spent learning how to kill other people. There are a couple of years there that I will never be able to get a grip on, never be able to learn how to love someone the way they should be loved. Never learned how to be, to give the personal parts of myself to another person. All those were taken away from me. I was robed of that--I'll never be close again. Emotional feelings, things that you should have learned that you'll never be able to grip again. There is a part of your life that you go through, a psychological stage, that you never revisit; and it's over, and you'll never get back there again. A lot of our problems are that we've tried to play catch-up. I tried to play catch-up with all my buddies in college, [by] joining fraternities and things like that, to be like they are. That is something you just can't do.

L: Were you committed to the war effort?

F: At first I was, and then, each day in Vietnam brings you more to the reality of what it is all about. It wasn't all the marching bands and shiny uniforms, and the shiny new guns and come home a decorated war hero. It wasn't Audie Murphy, that's what I am saying. It was shit. Each day that you spent in the middle of this shit, you began to feel more like part of that shit.

L: Did you get Short-timer's Syndrome, just the idea, "I got to live 365 days, and I'm out of this place?"

F: At first, yes. After my best friend was killed, seven months in the country, after that I just didn't care. Killing someone else, watching a piece of you, it would be like watching your ife being blown away right in front of you, and there is nothing you could do about

it. It's like a piece of your own body is gone. I don't know how to explain it. I developed a friendship that was like a brother. Man, he was like flesh and blood to me. We did everything together. We got laid together; we did it all together; we went through everything together. I was in the front; he was in the back, kind of like bonded to each other. Then, when he got blown away, it was like, there was nothing left. I was like an empty shell. After he got killed, I didn't care whether I lived or died. After he got killed is when I got all my decorations. Up until that point, I was more careful, beyond that I just didn't give a shit whether I made it or not. If I made it, I made it; if I didn't, I didn't give a shit.

L: You lost a sense of direction?

F: There never was any sense of direction. I lost a piece of me that I can never get back. I kind of base it on like a marital relationship, because the longer you are married, the more you know about your spouse, and the more your spouse knows about you. When your are in a combat situation, there are things about that person that, especially if he is a friend, that come to learn and know, and feel. Just like being married to the same woman for a long time. One year of combat, to me, would be like ten years of life, twenty years of life.

L: It's all pressed in on you at once?

F: Right. There are things about that person that you know so well. After he got killed, it was to me like, I didn't care whether I came home or not. I really didn't.

L: When you lost your friend, you lost your direction of a purpose?

F: Yes, our purpose was to come home in one piece. What we were going to do is do, what we had talked about, get together a band and play some music, do some partying, have some fun, be human beings for a change. After he got killed, the humanization of it all left. There was nothing humanitarian to me at all about that. war, it's effort or me. I was like a zombie. I went out every week; I came back every week. I even got to the point where I would see how much crap I could get into, how much shit I could get away with doing. Some of the grotesque things that I did after that was just to see if I could do it. There was no direction and no purpose, just surviving that day. I didn't care about

anything else.

L: Just that one day?

F: Making it one day.

L: Since you went over by yourself and then you were forced to come home by yourself, did that lack of emotional support cause a lot of problems you have now?

F: Definitely, yes. I am a loner because of that. Up until I went to the service, I always liked to be part of a team, meet people. I liked to have a lot of friends. Since the war, I can't trust anybody. I can't even trust myself to get that close to anybody, to have what I consider a friend. You are always a loner. I think because of the way the dross and rotation system was set up, it emotionally has scarred me for the rest of my life. I am not able to be a part of a group, to have a lot of friends. I guess sooner or later friends leave.

L: And you are afraid of the loss again? The idea of not being welcomed home, you said that that was the worst thing that could happen to you. You'd get spit on at the airport. Did that keep building up more and more?

F: The first two years were probably the worst as a civilian. I got home in 1970. It was just one incident after another. Some of the guys I was friends with before I went into the service, of course, we got what was left of us back together when I cam home. We went back to college, joined a fraternity; yet, at parties, I was always alone. I would never let myself get close enough to anybody, to be a buddy, a friend. It was the same way with women. You can't trust anybody but yourself.

The first two years were just one incident after another. I was constantly being harassed by the police, by other people, people that were never in the war. They asked, "How many people did you kill? How many gooks did you kill," and shit like that. You just kind of isolate yourself from everything else. I just couldn't handle anything; couldn't handle studying, couldn't handle going to class, couldn't handle people staring at me. I just felt like I was flipping out. The more I felt that way, the more I drank. I used to drink a lot of beer. Just that meant a lot. It got to the point where you could drink and drink and drink, and never get loaded. I went through a lot of jobs those

first couple of years. My family lost faith in me. They kind of even turned their back on me. I had a couple of DWI's, assault with the attempt to kill, did some time in jail and all this bullshit.

L: You felt alienated?

F: Definitely.

L: Nobody took the time to understand how you felt?

F: Nobody really understood, could understand me, because there was nothing. Nobody knew anything about delayed stress. I didn't even know anything about delayed stress until this year.

L: Would you say that it was because nobody took the time to even listen to you?

F: I think people wanted to hear these gory war stories. I just didn't get into gory war stories. It was a part of my life that I was trying to forget.

L: What I mean is, what if somebody would have come up, I mean your family, your mother or father or girlfriend? Would they have at least listened to some of the anxiety that you were suffering through?

F: What happened was this. When I left Vietnam, I closed the door. I shut all that, over there, away, and that part of my mind wasn't to be opened at all. I could not bring myself to talk to anybody about it. Whether it be good times or the bad. There were a few good times. I didn't participate in any of the, like the Fourth of July, Veteran's Day, happy bullshit to our government, that's all. Anything that had to do with the war, I had to shut it out in my mind completely. Nobody could talk to me about the war. Nobody could talk to me about anything. I was just like a zombie, kind of like just going through life, making it one day at a time if I could. I just felt like I was falling apart all of the time. As far as being open and compassionate, loving toward people, I didn't have the capability of doing that. It was a part of my life that passed me by. When I got into the service and into Vietnam, it's like the world stopped for that year, for me. Everybody else, it went on through. Then, when I came back, it was like I was put into it, at a different time. I just closed myself off completely from everybody.

L: You didn't want to face anyone?

F: No, I couldn't.

L: Do you think it would have béen easier to face it if you would have been welcomed home? If somebody would have said, "It's good to have you home, and we are glad that you did what you did?"

F: When I came home, I expected to be treated like I did something good. I expected, not a hero's welcome, but at least a welcome. I expected people to take off their hats to me because I was a vet, a combat man. I had been through the war, most people don't ever go through the war. None of it ever happened. The longer that this happened, the more closed off from society I became, the more in that shell I withdrew. It got to the point where I could go on for days without saying a word to anybody, so paranoid, restricted, sometimes not being able to talk. I couldn't see why anybody wanted to talk about this damn war.

L: What about the lack of training for civilian life? Like you said, you were trained for one thing. You were trained to seek out the enemy, destroy the enemy, or the capture of the enemy. They didn't train you to work in a factory. They didn't train you to wire a house or anything. Do you think that they shafted you there? They should have trained you?

F: Yes, I feel that should be a permanent part. If someone is good enough to enlist in the service, they should be good enough, at least--especially someone who is trained in combat--to retrain that person so he can do a job on the outside. When I came home from Vietnam, I didn't know anything but how to shoot people.

L: Yes.

F: I feel the government should, damn it, if they are going to train somebody to kill, to kill for the government, take that same person after he's done killing and retrain him to do something productive in society. I can't go into society and use the skills I learned in the Army. If I did, I would be in jail.

L: It's just like, "Well, we trained you to kill, so now, you have to face your own problems."

F: Right.

L: That is just something that happens, and you do it on your own now.

F: They took me from being an unskilled kid of eighteen years old, made me, in the same year, into a skilled professional killer. They sent me to Vietnam to do what they trained me to do. I went through jump school; I went through ranger school; I went through some of the best infantry training that this country can offer. I have been in jungle warfare; I have been in Lurp school and in combat school, and in just about every damn kind of school that they could possibly send me to to learn guerrilla warfare. When I came home, it was, "Here is the door kid. Good luck." There was no de-programming. There wasn't any retraining. There wasn't any. I am supposed to be a commercial illustrator. I can't even hold a pencil now.

L: They don't want to live up to the responsibility that they owe you?

F: That is right. Any of us.

L: The constant exposure to the life and death situation, is that still haunting you? Are you still a survivor?

F: I carry around a guilt of surviving. Like I said earlier, I think the luckiest guys over there were the guys that didn't come back. For them, the war ended the day they got killed. For the rest of us, the war goes on day after day.

L: What about the idea of the technology we used then, we had weapons like the Napalm, the artillery, the air strikes, did that detach you from the human aspect of the war?

F: There was no human aspect of that war. Those weapons were made to maim, hurt, disfigure, just literally tear people apart. That is an aspect of human nature. "Let's just see how gross we can get with them." That is how it was. If you have ever seen somebody burned by napalm, then maybe you would be able to understand. It just tears them apart. It gets on their skin, and you can't get it off. It just burns and burns and burns and burns until the chemicals burn themselves out. And, if you are lucky enough, you will die from it. If you are not, you are scarred with that for the rest of your life. The weapons that they got into just seemed like, "Let's develop a weapon that, if we use it, can screw somebody up even worse than the other weapons we made."

L: So, they made you take part of your humanity and stuff it away?

F: There was no humanity. there were no moral issues.

L: they made you an animal?

F: Exactly.

L: Now, they expect you to live like a human being?

F: Right.

L: And, forget everything that you were doing.

F: The day I went into the Army--I'll never forget that--I got to basic training in Fort Knox, Kentucky, and the senior drill instructor said, "You are not human beings. You are animals." That stays with me. Everything they taught you was not to be a human being, to have compassion, to have feelings. If you had feelings and compassion, you are a shit soldier. As soon as you got rid of those things, the better off you were, those emotions.

L: Do you suffer depression from all of this?

F: I'm depressed all the time.

L: Can you pinpoint why you are depressed? Is it just a struggle?

F: It is just a hassle living. I'd rather be dead than have to be like this. In fact, I don't know why I am still alive. I've done more shit to try and get myself killed than most people do, than ten people do in their lifetime. I've smashed up cars. I would run into trees. I used to get to the point where I would walk into a bar with the sole intention of finding the biggest asshole in that bar. I'd pick a fight, and hopefully, hopefully he would kill me. Nine times out of ten, the only thing I got was the shit kicked out of me. I was still living and breathing. I felt worse afterwards than I did before I went in there.

L: That was your way of coping with it?

F: Oh, the guilt, the survivors guilt that I feel is really nuts because of the type of soldiering that I had to do. From what I understand, delayed stress is, they finally figured it was different phases according to the type of combat that you were in, participated in. Sometimes, you just don't want to come home. As I said, sometimes I would rather be dead than to live like this.

Sometimes, after a rough night, I would wake up like I have been in a milkshake machine. I can't even hold a cup of coffee with one hand. This is continuous, you know. It never lets up. At least three to four nights a week, I wake up with nightmares. Since I have been working, particularly this year, it has intensified, those nightmares, sometimes to the point where I can't stand it, like it is real, it is happening all over again. I spent a lot of years trying to bury that, those feelings.

L: Does all this numb you out? Make you mentally numb?

F: You just feel like . . . I feel as though, I'm existing. That's it, just existing, not living. Not being human, just existing. Especially, you know, it has gotten to a point in my life where I lost a job, the Washington, D.C. thing on November the 14th. Finally, I brought myself to make a stand, because I felt that by going to Washington, I might be able to put together the pieces, figure out what the hell happened to me. Yet, I couldn't go. I ended up getting fired from a job, and now, I am fighting our system to try to get unemployment benefits, because I got fired over something I don't believe I was responsible for to begin with. Going to the unemployment office to apply for welfare, food stamps is so degrading to me. I have never collected unemployment in my life, up until 1980. Even after the war, I didn't even collect. I lived on my VA benefits and part-time jobs, rather than collect unemployment. You just get to the point where you feel lower than whale shit. You can't get any more.

L: It just numbs you?

F: Yes.

L: You become. . . .

F: A non-productive part of society. I can't do anything. You just get to the point where everything that you attempt to do, you already know how it is going to turn out, so why bother doing it?

L: Are you angry over this?

F: Really, because I don't think now that I am responsible for what has happened to me or for what I have done to hurt other people. People have tried to get close. People have tried to talk to me, try to be compassionate and understanding and loving, but you can't let them get

close. I can't open myself up, even with my fellow vets. Now, we have a group where we can get together and just bullshit. We can't get together. Each guy has his own problems. They may be alike in some ways, but they are different because each person is unique in their own way. We can't get together. One guy is fighting, and he wants to put a feather in his cap. He wants to do things for himself, not for me. The type of friendship I lost in Vietnam, or what I considered a friendship, will never be found again with anyone. Like I said, it is a piece of your life that is never going to be replaced. No matter what you do to try and straighten it out, it just seems like it gets worse.

L: So, you lost the trust in everybody and become unresponsive to any kind of compassionate overtures, even if they were in the best intentions?

F: Yes.

L: You can't cope with somebody.

F: No, you can't. You can't cope with anybody. You can't even cope with yourself! How are you going to cope with anybody else? To let them see you, to try and be part of the pain that you feel. Sometimes, it gets so intense to where you would just--I'd rather be dead than live the way I live.

L: This causes an anxiety? Would you say you get nervous and uptight about even little things?

F: Yes, I am always uptight. I'm always nervous when I start talking about the war. Trying to deal with the emotional ties, I shake. It starts inside me. I am always shaking. Yet, the government says there is nothing wrong with me. Man, there is something wrong with me. You don't shake like I shake. I don't even know how to put it. It is just such a bummer of a feeling that there is just no way, no words to describe how I feel.

L: Nobody wants to see it for what it really is?

F: Our United States Government turned Wilson down, because he was even studying delayed stress and its effects on Vietnam veterans. The DAV picked it up, and they started to study it; and fortunately, some people are beginning to open their eyes to the problem. There are one and a half million American Vietnam veterans in this country, according to Wilson. The longest period of

time that someone can deal with delayed stress is around fifteen years. Using the middle of the mark, which is 1970, fifteen years would be 1985. He predicts that these guys are going to starting commiting suicide. If they feel like I feel, there is no doubt in my mind that they won't. They have already killed who knows how many people, before--during the war. If they flip out--what if they take another person with them, just one other person. That is three million more dead people over a damn war that there was no reason for to begin with. Yet, it is not a problem that needs to be dealt with.

L: How do you think you can deal with the problem? What can you do?

F: Well, our government has to be made aware that the problem is there and it is real and it has to be dealt with. Otherwise, there is going to be a lot more dead people in the world that we shouldn't have to be. I feel that the government should bear the responsibility for it, because it is the government that got us into the war.

L: Do you think it was the government though? Wasn't it the American people as a whole that had to face the fact that their shortcomings were responsible for it, too?

F: Yes, the public has to be made aware of it. You talk to a guy on the streets about Vietnam, especially a World War II veteran. These guys are the next thing to God. What they did in World War II was, you know. . . . Nobody could ever touch what they did in World War II. They all think they are John Waynes and Audi Murphys and all the neat little war movies that we grew up with. The way we are treated by older veterans is unreal. The way that we are treated by people on the streets is unreal. You tell a person that you are a Vietnam veteran, and they look at you like you are some kind of nut, like you are ready to go crazy. That is no way to treat somebody that spent a year of their life to make sure, supposedly to make sure, that the war didn't come here. I gave part of my life that I will never get back. Yet, I still get treated like shit. I get treated like shit from everyone, the general public, the government, and fellow veterans.

L: Guys that should understand and they don't?

F: No, some guys don't want to even look at themselves as such.

L: Do you avoid things that remind you of the war?

F: I avoid contact, any--up until this year--any contact at all, anything that had to do with the military. The reason for that, like I was telling you earlier, in 1972 I re-enlisted. I couldn't handle it on the outside. I woke up after I was drunk in downtown Warren, broke. I sold my car. Drinking wine for about four or five days, in some little fleabag hotel down there. So, I went around the corner and enlisted in the Army. I can't make it on the outside. At least in the Army, I got a place to sleep it off. I went into the army, and it was the biggest mistake I've made in my life, other than going to Vietnam.

I felt that maybe the Army would be able to understand how I feel. I was a good soldier before that. When I was in Vietnam, I was a good soldier. During the training that I received before, prior to going to Vietnam, I was trying to do the best that I could at everything that I attempted. When I went back in the service, the first thing they did was take away my stripes. That pissed me off. Needless to say, my attitude went from thinking I was a good, productive soldier into one of feeling like shit. Anyhow, they sent me to Fort Benning, Georgia, to train rangers. I couldn't put up with the stress of dealing with the spit shine and starched fatigues and following orders and all the rinky dink bullshit that the peacetime Army has to do to get along. I got into one mess after another. I ended up getting busted three different times. They tried to ship me to two different places, once to Germany. I got out of that one. Then, they sent me to Hawaii.

I went AWOL, went back out into the world and tried to settle down again and I went through the same bullshit, drinking, getting into trouble, fights, different jobs, ended up getting married, and dragging my wife, who I am married to now, through all this bullshit. They finally picked me up about a year and a half later. In November 1974, I got picked up by the MP's. They sent me to a county jail in Pennsylvania. I spent two weeks there. From there I went to Pittsburgh Allegheny County Prison. I spent a month there in prison for going AWOL. From there, I went to Fort Lee in Maryland to an Army guardpost. They put me in solitary confinement. I wasn't even allowed to be around the other prisoners.

At the same time, Carter granted amnesty to all the draft dodgers. At Fort Mead, Maryland, they were bussing

the damn draft dodgers in from Canada, discharging them from the Army, which they never spent one fucking day in, with honorable discharges. It took me from November of 1974 until April of 1975 to get out of the Army with an undesirable discharge. They kicked me out of the Army. They took all my stripes. They busted me to a private E-9 and threw me out, knowing full well that I had psychological problems--because I had seen psychiatrists at Fort Benning before going AWOL. I had been to two different VA hospitals while I was AWOL, trying to get help for this problem. Everybody just kind of, like turned their back. "You don't have a problem, your problem is you don't want to face up to your responsibilities."

But, that wasn't true. I wanted to face up to my responsibility. It was that I just couldn't handle it emotionally. Anyhow, that was the final blow to me. I had my uniform, I used to keep my uniform--I had it cleaned--I used to keep it in a plastic bag. I had my beret and my greens, all my decorations and everything, just the way it was when I came home from Vietnam. I took everything I had from the service, and I burned it in 1975. I started home, even though I had never seen it.

L: Is this ever going to end for you?

F: God, I hope so. Two years ago, I applied for a discharge upgrade. That is where they have a panel that travels around the country. That is composed of five generals. You go up there and tell them your bleeding heart story, and they say yea or nay as to whether they are going to upgrade your discharge or not. I feel, due to the problems that I have had lately, the delayed stress, that my discharge should be upgraded. They have started to do something positive about it. That is what is beginning to change my life around now.

Up until this year, I refused to participate in anything that had to do with the government. I hadn't voted in my life. I wasn't old enough to vote when I went. When I came back, I didn't even feel like it. I still don't. I am anti-democracy, anti-government, anti-politics, completely against anything that has to do with our government because our government is all the time screwing us. Yet, when they want us to do something, we are supposed to be the first ones to say, "Yes, I volunteer." Well, I am sick of volunteering. All I have been getting is fucked.

L: Have you lost interest at home?

F: Yes. There is no purpose in it. My only purpose for existing right now is to make sure that my family, try to make sure that my family gets something out of this mess. My wife deserves something because of what she has put up with in the past eleven years. My kids deserve something. My older daughter has a seizure disorder, which I feel is caused from Agent Orange. No known cures, now known cause. Yet, our government doesn't want to do anything on studying the effect of Agent Orange and birth defects. Yet, my kid has to go around convulsing and shaking every time that it takes over her body. It is like she is a completely different person. She goes wacko on the floor. When you watch your own kids with their eyes rolled back into their heads, foaming at the mouth, just jerking around the floor, and you can't do a damn thing about it, it hurts, man. It is what the war has done to me. It hurts when you look at your wife, and you know that you love her, but you can't tell her. It hurts, and you know all the shit that you put her through.

It hurts when I reflect back on what I have been through. I've been in psychiatric hospitals. I've been through shock treatments. I've been through Thorazine, therapeutic bullshit. You know what they do with you? They take you in there and pump a bunch of Thorazine in you, so you can't even pronounce your own damn name, and yet, that was supposed to cure me. Well, it doesn't cure you. It doesn't make the pain go away. It doesn't do anything but put off something that should be dealt with.

Until this year, I haven't even been able to talk about my life. Now, since I have been in counseling sessions with George Kovach of Family Services, have I been able to face the problem now. I know what the problem is, but how do I do anything about it? What can I do? I am just a little 'ole guy here down in Warren, Ohio. How am I going to fight the whole damn government?

L: So, it is a never ending problem?

F: Yes, it is a vicious cycle. It seems like you go through phases. I've been through phases where I am on top of things. I have a good job. I am making decent money, paying the bills, and things are going okay. Then, I get into some kind of stressful condition, and I go off the deep end. I'd go out drinking. I'd go get crazy. I'd get into a fight, or I'd smash up a car, or

I would do something destructive. So, that the cycle goes around again.

I've put my wife and my family through hell. Now, I have two children. One has a seizure disorder; the other one has a speech impediment. Boy, I guess there is something wrong with me. I went to the VA hospital in Brachsville for an Agent Orange physical. I got a letter from them last week that I am in perfect condition and there is nothing wrong with me. Yet, I've got almost eighty thousand dollars in hospital bills with two children. There is something wrong with them, because of me. Because of them, the government. . . . But yet, they don't want to do anything about it. Do you know how many thousands and thousands of guys are in the same boat as I am or even in worse shape. What even bothers me now is the fact that, now, I am beginning to deal with--I am beginning to put the pieces of the puzzle together and know why this has happened. But, how many of the guys are still out there that don't know why?

It is imperative that something is done, now. That is why I have forced myself to even talk to you about that. You know, I don't know where your paper is going or what you are going to do with it, but maybe somebody of importance will hear what I have got to say. [They'll] do something about it, positive, instead of just saying, "Yes, I heard it, and forget about it." We can't forget.

L: Thank you very much for the interview.

F: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW