

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War Experiences

Personal Experience

O. H. 1269

RICK VICTOR

Interviewed

by

Douglas C. Senseman

on

February 21, 1987

RICK VICTOR

Rick's wife had seen an ad that I had entered into the Warren Tribune Chronicle asking for Vietnam vets to participate in oral history interviews. She told her husband about the ad and he was the only person who responded to that particular notice. Rick's wife was the one who called me to find out what type of information I was looking for in the interview. I managed to relieve her fears that it might be a "baby killers" interview in which I would accuse the vets of all types of heinous crimes in Vietnam. Later, Rick phoned me and we set up an interview.

I interviewed Rick in the basement of his home on North Road, S.E. in Niles, Ohio. It was a February day when I arrived around 10:30 a.m. to begin the interview. Children were playing outside on the drive and his young daughter was wandering around the house. Also present at the interview was his friend Tom Cononico. Rick wanted me to interview both of them at once, however, I informed him of the technical problems when the time would come to transcribe the interview and Tom agreed to listen and allow me to interview him at a later date.

Before the interview began, Rick showed me a lot of Vietnam memorabilia and literature on POW's and MIA's of which he is still very much concerned. During the interview, his daughter may be heard in the background as she attempted to talk with her Dad. When the interview was completed, Rick picked up his daughter and said that this was what his service in Vietnam was all about.

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INTERVIEWEE: RICK VICTOR

INTERVIEWER: Douglas C. Senseman

SUBJECT: Marine Corps, Combat Engineering, fragging
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

DATE: February 21, 1987

S: This is an interview with Richard Victor for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Vietnam War Experiences, by Douglas Senseman, on February 21, 1987.

S: Rick, could you tell me what you were doing prior to the war?

V: I was in high school.

S: What had you heard about the war when you were in high school?

V: Just what was on television and what was in the newspapers. It wasn't really a war. It was considered a police action. I guess even today politicians still call it a police action. Among kids fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years old, there wasn't that much back then, you had a job to do for your country; patriotism and mom's apple pie and the American way. After graduation I knew where I was going. I joined the Marine Corps.

S: Had you formed any opinions about the war?

V: I didn't know how to form an opinion about a war then. Because it was just considered a police action. I knew there was shooting going on over there, and fighting, people dying on both sides. It was supposed to be for freedom. The type of opinion that I would have formed then was to be a patriot.

S: So how did you happen to enter the Marine Corps?

V: Boy, that is a joke. I made five appointments with the U.S. Navy to join the Navy and the recruiter never showed up. So I joined the Marine Corps.

S: You were seventeen?

V: Yes.

S: What were the feelings of your family and friends when you told them you were joining the Marines?

V: Oh, boy, for seventeen years it was drummed into my head I was going to join the Navy. So I did. I joined the best branch of the Navy, the Marine Corps. That upset quite a few people. The first combat troops in Vietnam were the United States Marines. Prior to that, they were Green Beret Advisors. The first combat troops were sent, if I'm not mistaken, in May, 1965.

S: So when you joined the Marines, you knew there was a very good chance that you'd be going to Vietnam?

V: Yes. About a 95% chance.

S: Before going to Vietnam, did you think you could even locate it on the map?

V: I never even knew what it was or even heard of it prior to two years or three years before that, when it first started coming out. It was the most controversial thing going at the time, most televised, anyway.

S: Do you remember the date that you joined the Marine Corps?

V: Oh, yes. February 15, 1965.

S: What kind of training did you receive right after you joined the Marines?

V: How to kill, without a killing machine.

S: Where did you receive your training?

V: Ferris Island, South Carolina.

S: After your basic training, did they give you special training for Vietnam?

V: No. I went to Camp Lejeune, that's in North Carolina. I was stationed there a couple months. Then they reacted the 5th Marine Division out in Camp Pendleton. That was about the only training for warm weather, the only tropical training I got was out in Camp Pendleton, California.

S: What had you heard about Vietnam when you were in training?

V: Not to trust anybody over there. You didn't know who the enemy was. During the day, they could be working beside you or with you or helping you out. At night they'd be out there cutting your throat. The same people that you work with everyday.

S: Did you feel that the training you received was adequate for Vietnam?

V: For terrain, yes. Knowing and learning about the people, no. The type of training that I got they didn't really tell you that much about the people. All they told us was that they were indigenous people. They are not to be trusted. When we got there, what I found out about the people while we were there was that they didn't want us there to begin with. They had been fighting that war for thousands of years. It dates back to 111 B.C. They had been fighting since then amongst themselves and they really didn't want us there.

S: Do you remember when you first heard that you were going to Vietnam?

V: Yes. September of 1965. I got transferred out to California and that was what they were reactivating that outfit for. I got to Vietnam May of 1966.

S: How about the trip over to Vietnam. What was that like?

V: It took twenty days on board ship. It wasn't bad. I got along well with the Navy personnel on board ship. They fed us well. We had special training. Getting gear together. They had us on a rifle range on board. Basic stuff that you'd do between here and there. Make sure your gear is kept up, rust is off of it, because salt water will definitely rust equipment real fast. We landed at the white sands of Chu Lai in May of 1966.

S: What was going through your head on the way over there?

V: I was scared. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what to look for. You didn't trust anybody. You kept that inside your head. You trusted the guy next to you, that was it, as long as he was round eye. It was mostly just fear of the unknown. You learned fast.

S: Would you say that on the trip over, you were more optimistic or more pessimistic about your chances for making it?

V: I was coming back. Come hell or high water, I was coming back.

S: Did you think that was the general consensus?

V: Yes. That was the basic consensus of everyone that I knew at the time. Everybody basically had the same thoughts. "I'm coming home." In some instances it was safer to be over there than on the streets in the United States.

S: Do you remember the date you actually arrived in Vietnam?

V: It was May 12, 1966.

S: What were your first thoughts when you got off the boat when you were in Vietnam?

V: We spent one day on board ship. After we pulled into the harbor there. For a whole day, they kept us below decks. They had grenades going off all day. That was all we ever heard. They changed the times for off loading a half dozen or so times. We got off the boat the morning of the 13th. We started at 5:00 a.m. We hit the beach, just like they do in the movies.

S: How would you describe your first day, then, in Vietnam?

V: I was scared shitless because you didn't know what to expect. It was a quiet landing, but we were just apprehensive about what was going on, what to do. It was hot. I think it must have been 102, 103 degrees. We weren't ready for that kind of heat. When the temperature got up to 105 and 110, that was warm.

S: You were carrying what kind of equipment?

V: Full field pack. That was shelter hat, clothes, weapon, ammo, canteen, bayonets. You basic full field pack.

S: How much would that weigh?

V: It was eighty-seven pounds, plus your own weight.

S: I had heard that the new people in Vietnam I think they might have called them grunts?

V: No, grunts are infantrymen. Everybody's basic job is a grunt, an infantryman.

S: So basically that's what you were then?

V: Well that is our basic job, but I was a combat engineer, school trained in demolitions and ammo warfare.

S: Did they treat the people who had just arrived, differently than people who had been there for a while?

V: Yes. You're called an NFG. That is called New Fucking Guy, or No Fucking Good, whichever came first. It didn't take long to get rid of the NFG name tag. Everybody, no matter what you do or where you go that was new was looked upon a little bit differently than everybody else, because he really doesn't understand what is going on. They don't know anybody, they don't know what to do. It's like if you move from school to school, you're new. You don't know the clique, you don't know the people to stay with, the people to stay away from. Well, just like going into a combat area, you don't really know who to trust, who has been there the longest, who to watch for, who to look out for, who to try to get close to. Stuff like that.

S: So you are more vulnerable, maybe more dangerous?

V: Yes, you are more dangerous to everybody because you really don't know what is going on. Even to yourself. I saw a lot of movies where they put a new guy out walking the point. You don't do that. You don't put anybody new out walking the point. They will get you killed most of the time. You just don't know what to look for.

S: Now what exactly does that mean when you "walk point"?

V: Well, the point man, he walks out first. He's the one that is anywhere from twenty yards out, thirty yards out, he can be 100 yards out. He's the one that goes through passes or ravines, or crosses rivers or crosses openings first. He's the one that is checking for booby traps and snipers and things like that.

S: Going over a typical day in Vietnam, can you explain what a typical day was like? What was the food like?

V: Good old C-rations, packaged and canned in 1924. It was good, as long as you had yourself a bottle of good old fashioned hot sauce.

S: How did you sleep? Did you sleep well?

V: You slept with one eye closed, and one eye open, both ears open. You slept very, very light. A twig could crack 300 yards away, you're wide awake. You could hear somebody sneaking around. If he's walking in his stocking feet you could hear him walking on the sand. You learned that in a matter of a week's time, if that long. You did sleep with one eye closed and one eye open but both ears are wide awake.

S: What else can you add about the weather?

V: That is the only place I've been in my life where the sun was shining, it was raining so hard you couldn't see three feet in front of your face, standing butt hole deep in mud with dust blowing in your face all at the same time.

S: Animals? Snakes?

V: Oh, yes. They had snakes and spiders and scorpions and centipedes. Everything over there, the way the weather and temperature was, everything over there, like your spiders and your ants, were ten times bigger than what we have over here. I saw centipedes over there one foot to one and one-half foot long. I saw a wall of spider web that would cover thirty to forty feet. The spider in the middle was at least six or seven inches across. They had some weird stuff over there. They had black ants over there that were an inch long. When you stepped on them, it sounded like you just stepped on a twig. That is how strong and hard the shell of their bodies were. They still got rats over there that are bigger than our house cats over here. Have you ever seen a ten or fifteen pound rat?

S: No.

V: I could bring a rat back and put it up against any dog here in the United States. The rat would win.

S: What was your first encounter with the North Vietnamese?

V: My first encounter with North Vietnamese was a long time after I'd been there. My first encounter with Charlie, or a VC was about a week after I'd got there. It was just mostly sniper fire. We really didn't get him, well, we didn't get him. Somebody else probably got him. He had us pinned for about an hour or so. I

didn't see the enemy for awhile after that.

S: One of the things we here a lot about are the booby traps and the mines that they had waiting for the soldiers there. Can you elaborate on what some of those were like?

V: Bad. They used just about everything. The enemy was so good at it. They used to say what atrocities the American soldier did on the poor Vietnamese. We used to find foot traps that were set up with two boards with spikes coming through that had an anti personnel mine at the bottom of it. The booby trap itself, when you stepped down, would swing up and drive the spikes into the soldier's ankles. You couldn't pull it back up but the booby trap would go off. It wasn't enough to kill him or tear his leg off, but it was enough to shatter every bone in his leg. To go along with that, sometimes, they would have pit vipers in there too. It was called a step and a half. If you get bitten by a pit viper, you have about a step and a half left to live. They are very deadly. They are about a foot long and about as round as a pencil.

S: What about so called, Bouncing Betty?

V: Good old Bouncing Betty. A forty millimeter camp shell. That was from World War II and it was as big as a sixteen or thirty-two ounce tomato can. You would bury it in the ground, it was set off on a pressure release it would come up waist high and it would go off. If it didn't kill you, you were crippled. It took your legs off.

S: Do you know of any Americans who were killed by so called friendly fire while you were there?

V: Do I know any personally? Oh, yes. Somebody would call the wrong coordinates and they would fire a few rounds and they ended up short and they went around shooting their own people. Air Strikes, if someone would call in wrong coordinates, they'd drop it right on top of their heads.

S: What was your rank when you were there?

V: Private.

S: How did you get along with your officers?

V: I didn't. Very few peons, that's what you'd call your enlisted personnel, got along with officers. When I was there, the officers I considered were arm chair officers. You got your arm chair quarterbacks that sit at home every Sunday and watch football, that is how

they watch football; they don't know how to play the game. They held inspections, they wanted salutes everywhere they went. You're taught in boot camp when you are in a combat area or combat zone, you don't salute no officers. That is where the enemy used to mess up. They used to try to shoot the officers because they figured if you'd shoot the officers the troops wouldn't know what to do. Nine out of ten times, you could get rid of the officers and you're going to have one hell of a time whipping the troops because they know exactly what they are going to do. They know more than the officers do out in the field. A lot of them were ninety day wonders. 2nd Lieutenants, fresh out of college, OCS.

S: That is why they are called ninety day wonders?

V: Yes. OCS, ninety day wonders. They had all book learning.

S: Was it common for the men to sometimes disobey orders from their officers?

V: Not outright disobey. Bend them a little bit, yes. But we bent orders before. If we were told to go here by this route, we'd go there but we'd take our own route that we knew was safe.

S: What does the term fragging mean?

V: Kill somebody. It could be an NCO, it could be an officer, it could be someone that you didn't like, it could be one of your own friends that was a troublemaker. A person who is trying to be hardcore who is not, or trying to cause trouble for somebody, causing hard feelings amongst troops, trying to put on airs. Just basically causing hassles for people.

S: Did you know of any officers who were so called fragged?

V: Yes. I have known of an officer who was fragged, staff NCO's that were fragged, Sergeants who were fragged. I can't actually say that I heard of any enlisted personnel being fragged. It was mostly NCO's and staff NCO's and officers.

S: Was anybody ever caught?

V: Oh, yes. They have caught people. I couldn't tell you right off-hand. I saw guys carried away.

S: Now we know that the relations between the officers and the men were sometimes kind of tense. What about relations between blacks and whites in Vietnam?

V: When I was there, there was no black and white. Guys in my outfit would cover each others butts no matter if you were black or white. We lived together, we ate together, we trained together, we fought and died together, we screwed together. From what I understand in later years after I was there, there was a lot of animosity. The blacks were here and whites were there and you treated the blacks like blacks and the whites like whites. You segregated stuff like that. After I got out of the service and came back from Vietnam, there was more back here than there was in Vietnam, because you needed each other over there.

S: How about drug use in Vietnam, would you say it was rampant?

V: No. Pot, maybe, but not drugs.

S: How did the men come to acquire pot?

V: It was an open market over there. That was a yearly harvest. That was some of the best refer you could buy. Sai Gon Blue, guaranteed, one hit and you're up in the sky.

S: This was bought from...?

V: The gooks. They rolled it as big as Pall Mall sized cigarettes. It looked just like a cigarette, and came in packages of ten.

S: The Vietnamese became very capitalistic, they were able to make a lot of money off the Americans.

V: Oh, yes. So did this country. It was strictly for profit. When we were over there, that country made money, this country made money, everybody was working here. That is just like every war. During World War I, this company was working, steel mills were working, auto industries were working, rubber, petroleum, everybody was working; every war.

S: Was it hard to form friendships in Vietnam or easy?

V: You don't form friendships in a situation like that. You form what is called acquaintances. Some did form good friendships, good relationships. I've lost quite a few good friends. You just can't eat, sleep, live and die with a person without becoming close to them. You learn about each other's family, thier girlfriends, their wives.

S: Have you kept in touch with any of the people you were with?

V: Not while I was over there. Now other Vietnam Vets that I grew up with, we were kids together and palled around together and people I've acquired as friends since then, I have more Vietnam Vet friends than I've got friends that I grew up with. Now, all the guys I went to school with, I've only got two friends out of that, they are both Vietnam Vets.

S: When you were in Vietnam, what did you find to be the basic skills of survival?

V: Keep your ass down! Basically that is about what it was. That and do your job. You don't trust anybody, especially the gooks over there. You couldn't see anything that was standing three feet in front of you anyway if they didn't want you to see them. But you could smell them.

S: One Veteran I've talked to said that you form a primitive state of mind. Does that mean anything to you?

V: Yes. It's called sense of self-preservation overrules. Everything your mother and dad taught you is gone. You learn how to take care of yourself. It is called survival. I'm going to protect me and I'm going home. I don't care about you, but I'm going home.

S: Now obviously going to Vietnam is a vast change in culture. What was it about the culture that you found most difficult to assimilate?

V: They didn't care. They were filthy, they had no modern living standards as far as from what I experienced. I'm sure they had electricity in the big towns and they got telephones in the big towns. I never made it to the big cities so I don't know if they had hot and cold running water or not. A lot of guys made it to Sai Gon. They used to go on weekends into Sai Gon and stuff like that. The only ones that I saw, they crapped in the fields and they had dirt floors and lived in thatched huts, or cardboard houses, or anything they could scrounge up. But, a lot of people had money though. It was just their way of life. It wasn't modernized at all. I didn't hit any big towns. The towns that I did hit most of the time were getting shot at or bombed or something like that.

S: It's very ironic but some people who have written about the Vietnam war, who were there, said that they had a 9:00 - 5:00 war. Does that mean anything to you?

V: I never was into that part of it. I guess what you mean from 9:00 - 5:00 would be the guys at the air bases. They get up in the morning and deliver supplies and it was an eight hour day. I was a combat engineer

and I was in demolitions of ammo warfare, my war was twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I spent most of my time in the bush. What little time I did spend back at the compound area was getting supplies ready and my gear straightened around to make another push. What we called a "rough ride", which is called a convoy. Wherever that was going.

S: What kind of relations did you have with the Vietnamese adults, the civilians?

V: That we, as soldiers, had?

S: Yes. contact.

V: It all depended on where you were at. Like I said earlier, the people really didn't want us there. I think the reason that they liked us there was because they were making money off of us. Now I used to buy things from off of the gooks. The only time I got a cold pop was off the gooks, but it cost me \$1 for an ice cold coke. When I first got there, you weren't allowed to buy anything because they were indigenous personnel. About the only good relationship that they had was a lot of women made a lot of money off of the G.I.'s over there.

S: What about the Vietnamese children, any contact with them?

V: Oh, yes. All the time you had contact with the kids over there. I guess just about every family had ten kids running around, from eight to eighteen. They were always after the G.I.'s. We always used to get little candies and gum in our C rations and we used to throw it to the kids. I made friends with a lot of kids there. I got a bunch of pictures from a lot of little kids I used to know.

S: Did you ever work with the South Vietnamese Army in conjunction with them?

V: Never as a sole participant with an armored outfit, no. We worked together with them. My outfit would go out and work with them but to go out myself with an outfit of theirs, no, never a one on one basis. We have worked with them as, you know, two outfits working together--like on sweeps, or Search and Destroys or something like that.

S: What seemed to be the perception of the South Vietnamese Army, paragons?

V: When I was there, a bunch of cowards. I saw more of them run in a fire fight than I saw get into a fire

fight. I've actually seen them drop their weapons and run from a fire fight.

S: How would you rate the medical attention given the G. I.'s?

V: When we were in the field? I'll tell you what, I would take a Corpsman anytime. They were good. He might have been what is considered a backyard surgeon but some of those guys were good. They patched guys together with nothing and kept them alive.

S: Did you ever require any medical attention?

V: Yes. I was hit twice while I was over there.

S: How did that come about, you being wounded?

V: Once was fragmentation, shrapnel, from a mine going off. The first time I didn't even know I was even hit. The second time, I knew I was hit and I thought it was all over. But here I am to tell you about it thanks to a corpsman. I had a stomach wound.

S: What happened immediately after you were hit with the stomach wound?

V: It hurt. It burned like fire. It didn't feel too good. We got hit by North Vietnamese regulars. They had come across the river at us and hit us. It lasted a couple of hours. They couldn't get nobody out of there for a couple of hours. After it ended they took the wounded to Da-Nang.

S: How long were you in Da-Nang?

V: I think I spent two months there. My main base of operation was right outside of Da-Nang. But I was right there at the field hospital about two months, I went back to my outfit and start all over again.

S: What was it like in the field hospital?

V: What is any hospital like, really. They took pretty good care of us. I got no complaints. I'm here.

S: When you were in Vietnam, what really kept you going?

V: Coming home. Some John D. back here isn't getting my old lady. I'm coming home. You get over there, your sense of values is gone. You don't have any actual sense of values. You hear through television, or radio, about the atrocities of the G.I.'s doing on the poor Vietnamese. They never tell you the atrocities that the Vietnamese are doing to the G.I.'s. All you

can think about is getting home and moving back back to a country that is actually split. There are holding marches back here, "Ban the bomb", "Get out of Vietnam!", kids getting killed on campuses and things like that. Why is that going on when this country is supposed to be so great, when we are supposed to be fighting for freedom and everything?

S: You mentioned the atrocities. What were some of the atrocities the Vietnamese were inflicting on the G.I.'s?

V: We found an officer that was missing for about three days. He was tied to a tree with his Geneva Convention card spiked to his forehead. He was shot between the eyes. That was all he got. We found G. I.'s that went out on patrol and come up missing, never heard from, weeks later they were found with their hands tied behind their backs, kneeling position, shot in the back of the head. That is against the Geneva Convention. We saw guys that were castrated, we found bodies where their eyes had been gouged out, things like that, guys that had been butchered.

S: Did you witness any American atrocities on the Vietnamese?

V: I won't answer that one.

S: Although this sounds odd, some men report that they had some good times in Vietnam.

V: I'm not saying that I didn't have a couple good times. We had some good times, but the hard times overrode the good times, but we had good times. If we were out in the bush for any length of time, like thirty or forty days, we'd come back in and we'd have three days. First day, you get your gear all back together, make sure everything is working okay, stock back up. The second day, you basically partied. You went to the slopshoot and had a couple beers, you had a got a nice, decent hot meal, you had a shave and a shower and a clean change of clothes; the third day you saddled up and got ready to go back out again. That second day was usually a good time, very few people pissed with you, or screwed you around or anything. And like I said, on the third day, you saddled back up, got your gear loaded back up and headed back out.

S: Kind of in the same vein, did anything funny ever happen to you when you were in Vietnam?

V: I don't know. I really can't answer that about something being funny. No, there was nothing funny. It was all too serious, too real.

S: When did you finally get the news that you were about ready to leave.

V: I knew when I was about ready to leave. You know that. It was supposed to be 13 months shore to shore. Well, I ended up doing almost 15 months. In our outfit we had a lot of orders that were lost. We had an office that was blown up. A lot of orders got burned up, and everything else. We had to wait for orders to come back and be recycled and shit like that. Basically, everybody knows their basic return date. When guys start getting from about three months on, that's ninety days. I'm short. You don't want to do anything, you don't want to go anywhere. Everyday goes by. You don't even want to crawl out from a sandbag bunker, really.

S: You're saying that you were there longer than you were supposed to be.

V: Yes. I spent almost fifteen months over there.

S: Normally it's a year?

V: It's thirteen months shore to shore. Well, a year was for the Army, thirteen months was for the Marine Corps. Why it was set that way, I really don't know.

S: Didn't that make you pretty upset?

V: Who am I to change it, that's orders.

S: I mean the fact that they lost your orders?

V: Oh, yes. A lot of guys got upset because... "What the hell are we doing, we're supposed to be out of here, yesterday and how come we're still here?" You went by what was ordered down to you. "Orders are coming, they'll be here." When something would come up, like if a "rough ride" come up, or another operation come up, or a sweep come up, you tried to stay in the back. One thing you learn in the service, you don't volunteer for anything. Like you know, "Does anybody here have a driver's license?" "Yes, I do." "Good, you're driving that shovel, you're driving that wheelbarrow." You don't volunteer for anything. Keep your mouth shut and try to hide.

S: How about your last day. What was that like?

V: That was a happy day. You're elated, you feel good. Yet, in a way, it's a little bit sad too, because you know you're going home and you're leaving guys there that you spent a year with, or six months, or whatever. In a way, you don't want to leave them there by them-

selves. You don't want to leave there. You don't know how you're going to act because you're now going to be living on the edge any longer. It's a mixed emotion feeling, really. The best feeling I got though was as soon as that bird lifted off the ground. Then I knew for sure I was on my way home. That was the greatest feeling. When I flew over the Golden Gate Bridge, I knew I was home.

S: So you took an airplane all the way from where? Vietnam to?

V: Yes. Da-Nang Air Base, to Yukota Air Base in Japan, from there to Okanawa, from Okanawa to Travis Air Force Base in California.

S: How long did that take to come back home?

V: Ninety-six hours, four days. From the time I left until the time I was sitting in Travis Air Force base.

S: That was basically one continuous trip?

V: Yes. Well, I spent two days in Okanawa. What that was for was to make sure that you got a hair cut, you got your uniforms all caught back up to date, you had your full military issue. They tried to bring you back into the normal life style they say, become a human being again. Though for some people, it didn't work.

S: It would be awful hard in ninety-six hours to go from Vietnam to the United States.

V: Yes. It's like they say, from the foxhole, to the front porch.

S: Then you were out of the service?

V: Oh, no. I wish. I still had two years to go. When you came back, there is no, what was to be considered, I guess, dream time, or talking time, or understanding time from there to now. From Vietnam to home, there is no stopping in between. You went right from the foxhole right to home, on leave. You don't have any talking time to talk over how you were feeling, to get you used to going back into what was called the world. When I came home, I was home five days after I left Vietnam--that's home, home--on leave. I said to my father, "Dad, we got to sit down and talk." He told me, "I ain't got no fucking time." So I put a lid on it. The lid was on for almost fifteen years. I didn't talk about it at all. But I paid for my own hell. That was one of the worst mistakes that the government ever made. They didn't give a talking over time from foxhole to home. Everybody says that you didn't do

anything different than World War II or World War I. Well, World War I and World War II and Korea, they didn't rotate person for person for person for person, they rotated outfit for outfit. They guys that you spent a year with here, they all rotated back to the States at the same time; the same guys that you lived with for a year. They all came back the same time you did. Well, during Vietnam, it wasn't like outfit for outfit didn't get rotated. It was person for person getting rotated. See, Tom and I went over there at the same time, okay, we might get transferred around to two different outfits. Now I might not see him again for thirteen or fourteen months. Now I might extend for six months, which you could do over there, a lot of guys did it for money, and Tom might go home. Well he didn't go back with me. He went back by himself. I come home six months later. My outfit didn't go, I went. There was no time for debriefing. There was no time. You got rotated back by yourself. Now if you would have come back with your outfit, it would have been okay because the whole outfit would have say, left Vietnam, landed in Okanawa, spent a week in Okanawa, I guess, or whatever, got your uniforms up, debriefed, relaxed, unwound and then sent you back home, you probably would have spent another ten days or a month at your home base and then went on leave. Then you would have had forty-five days or so to get it all out of your system. Well you didn't. Days, some people hours.

S: You mentioned that your father didn't want to talk to you about the war. Do you have any idea why he felt that way?

V: I think the reason was that he didn't understand. Now he was in the Navy. He was in World War II. He lived and fought his war. I guess in his own mind, I didn't do anything different from what he did, which basically, I probably didn't. But like I said, he rotated back outfit for outfit. He was on board ship. Now when his ship came back in, for refitting or whatever it was, his whole outfit came in. We didn't. When he came back to the States, his whole outfit came back to the States. We came back person for person. You might come back with forty, fifty or sixty guys but you don't know any of them. You never saw any of them before in your life. They are from forty or fifty different outfits. You might come back with Navy personnel, Marine Corps personnel, Army personnel, Air Force personnel, whatever. Guys you never even saw or heard of before. You lived the same kind of life but still, though, you didn't know anybody. You didn't have time to actually talk things over. When you did hit the states, you don't want to have the time to talk too. You want to start living. Somebody asked me one

time to go "cruising". I said, "What is cruising?" He said, "Just drive down the street, the old drive to McDonalds, look for chicks." I said, "I ain't got time for that." I had just come back from Vietnam. He said, "What do you mean, you ain't got time for that?" I said, "I'm too old for that, I don't have time for that, I'm too old for that." I went over there as a seventeen, or eighteen year old kid, but when I came back, I was thirty years old in my mind. So I lost that period of time, the growing years or whatever you want to call it, to where you set your values, your goals, or whatever. My goals and my values were set from the time I pulled the trigger for the first time. It made me ten years older then, instantly. It's not that it makes you a man, it's just that you grow up fast, too fast. It's in an instant. You don't have the time to where... "This weekend we're going to go here, or next weekend we're going to make plans for this." You live on the edge twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I'm going to make it, I'm going to hit today, what is going to happen today, I'm going to make it, or I'm going home. You don't have time to set goals. The only goal that you do have is to bring your ass back home.

S: So some of your friends who weren't in the war maybe had trouble relating to you when you came back?

V: I couldn't relate to them. Mental wise, I was too old for them, what I considered child games to those guys. Cruising and parties at people's houses, bashes and dances and things like that, I didn't have time for that. I was too old. Not physical wise, but mental wise, I was ten years older than they were, twelve years older than they were. My life had already been set.

S: Did you ever have any desire to go back to Vietnam?

V: Yes. To go back and find the youth that I lost which is gone forever. I can honestly say that I do miss being over there. I don't know for the main reasons why. I miss being over there. I don't know if it is living on the edge or everybody wore green, or everybody carried a weapon or what it was. It was never dull. You couldn't afford to let yourself get into a rut. Back here, you got the same thing everyday, everyday, everyday. When you're over there, time went fast on some occasions, some occasions it didn't, but you were never in a rut, because you couldn't afford to let yourself get in a rut. Because once you let yourself get in a rut and got down, you were dead. You had to stay awake, you had to stay alive. I can honestly say that I miss it. I do. I'll be forty years old this year, but I miss it. I'd go back there right now,

if I got a chance and I think it is for the simple reason to go find the youth that I know is gone forever. The part of me that I left over there, the teenager, whatever you want to call it.

S: Do you think the United States should have been there in the first place?

V: You know, I really can't answer that. I'm not much on politics, I really don't know why we were there in the first place. I spent fifteen months to get my ass shot off, and a lot of guys got killed over there, and to this day, I still don't know why we were there. You know, we can grow our own rice here. The people really didn't want us over there, the ones that I've talked to. The language sucked. Actually, there was nothing there for us. There was nothing there that we didn't have here. Except for we were trying to keep communism out of the country. Well, shit, they've been fighting that for 2000 years. And look at today, communist rule. There is no Sai Gon, it's Ho Chi Mihn City. There is no South Vietnam anymore, its all Vietnam. So what the hell did we win? We weren't allowed to win. That could have been over in less than 2 years time if they let us do what we were taught to do and trained to do.

S: For example, what wouldn't they allow you to do?

V: There were times when you got shot at, and you weren't allowed to shoot back. There were times that you weren't allowed to carry any ammo but you had to have your weapon with you at all times. But you weren't allowed to have no ammo. You could be sitting in a no fire zone, ten feet away I could be sitting in a free fire zone where I could shoot whatever I wanted to. There were no front lines. Because you might take this area today at noon, and today at 3:00, you got to back there and retake it again. There were no front lines. World War II, Korea, World War I, the enemy was right there, right in front of you at all times. You'd move up, you'd take this, you'd build it up, that's yours. You kept it, you never lost it, and you moved right on ahead. Well, in Vietnam, we used to go in and take this villiage, four or five clicks out, and go back the next day or a week later and have to retake it again. Because you would go in, take it, move out and Charlie would move right in behind you, because Charlie was all around you.

S: Why would they designate an area no fire zone?

V: I really don't know why they did that. I couldn't answer that if I wanted to.

- S: I've heard and I find it hard to believe that our government was worried about the rubber trees.
- V: Oh, yes. They've got natural resources there that are out of this world. They've got copper, tin, silver, rubber, natural gas. Hell, Shell Oil Company had a drilling well set up over there from Bulk Station. U.S. Steel was there, Goodyear was there. They were all over there. All your big companies from the United States all had factories and stuff set up over there, because of natural resources. That must have been the reason for it, for us being there, was the natural resources. Bananas, I came back and looked like a banana. I had enough bananas to feed me for a lifetime, buddy. Watermelons, coconuts, and rice. Four hundred billion acres of rice, and waterbuffalo.
- S: Have you ever been down to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.?
- V: Yes. I've been to the Wall. I haven't been down there since they put the statue up. I'm going to make one more trip then I'm done. I want to see the statue. Well, two more trips because they are going to put a statue for the nurses up there and they deserve it. So I got two more trips to make down there.
- S: What do you think the biggest misconception is today about the Vets?
- V: A lot of people that you talk to over the years call us a bunch of cry babies. We had name tags of baby killers, murderers, drug addicts, and everything slapped on us. That caused a lot of animosity amongst the vets, themselves, plus with the civilian population. I think the reason for that was it was the most televised war in the history of the United States. It split the country. The country hasn't been split since the Civil War. We weren't really considered Veterans of a foreign war for a long, long time, even though 60,000 died. Another 100,000, you figure are crippled or stuff like that. They screwed us around for our benefits. The Vietnam War really isn't taught in school. Most of the history books that I've seen since Vietnam, you might be three or four pages on the Vietnam War, something like that. That's about it. I used to go to schools and talk on the Vietnam Vet and the Vietnam War and I think it should be taught more so, so the younger generation coming up won't let themselves get caught in the same situation as we did.
- S: How would you describe that situation?
- V: A no win situation. We weren't allowed to win, we weren't supposed to win. Like I said, it wasn't con-

sidered a war, a police action, whatever you want to call it. They want to take the benefits away from the Vet, like free hospitalization and things like that. Ever since the Vietnam War, I feel, this is my own feelings, that the military services today aren't what they should be due to the Vietnam War. The Vet got shit on, name tags slapped on them, like murders and baby killers and things like that. The atrocities that were said that the Veteran did to the poor people of Vietnam, it was televised too much. They told bullshit stories as far as I'm concerned, like body counts. I hated that, body counts. "There was 2,000 of the enemy killed today, only three American soldiers were wounded, one was killed." The next day there were "10,000 enemy killed today, 500 American soldiers killed." They televised it. There was nothing sacred at all about the Vietnam War. When the Vet did come back and tried to talk to somebody about it, people didn't want to hear it. They already knew what was going on. The media told them, and ninety percent of what the media told them wasn't true anyway. It was all blown out of proportion. That's what turned a lot of people off about it. They wanted to make it a high tech war. There is no such thing as a high tech war. They want to have nuclear wars. There is no winner in a nuclear war. If you're going to have a war, have a conventional war. If people want to have a war, good. Take all the politicians, put them in an arena, give them a sword and say, "There, may the best man win." Whatever politician wins, that is the winner of the war. Wars are brought up to take care of unemployment. Wars make money for everybody, takes care of the population. So you blow off 100,000 people. So what? That's the cost of living, I guess.

S: If someone listened to this tape in 2087, what would you tell them to remember about the American involvement in Vietnam?

V: I don't know if I can answer that one right. Maybe I don't know the political way to say it. If you're going to have a war, commit the whole country to it. Don't just commit a certain few, and don't let it split the country. Don't let it lead to animosity amongst family, friends, neighbors; don't make it a pro and con.

In Lebanon, they sent over a peace keeping force. They weren't allowed to fire on nobody. They get fired at, they couldn't fire back unless they made a telephone call. If you are going to do that, commit them whole heartedly, not only halfway. In committing people whole heartedly, I feel that you save more lives by committing somebody into a situation like that and committing them wholeheartedly, than to just put them

in there to be pawns. Let them be the peace keepers that they are over there for; to keep the peace, the way they are trained to keep it. Don't hold their reins when they can't do anything to protect themselves. To me kids died over there for no reason, because somebody had to make a phone call first. That shouldn't happen. My advice, don't have wars. Let the politicians have the wars.

S: Well Rick, thank you very much for doing this interview. I appreciate it.

V: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW