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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Conflict 1961-75

Personal Experience

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RONALD CARTMELL

Interviewed

by

Darlene Pavlock

on

December 6, 1991

RONALD A. CARTMELL

Ronald A. Cartmell was born August 9, 1944 in Logan County, West Virginia. His parents, five brothers, and two sisters moved several times between the coal country of Kentucky, Tennessee, and southern Ohio before eventually settling near Portsmouth, Ohio. Although his family moved frequently in his childhood, he did not travel as a youth. Two months prior to high school graduation in 1965, he received his draft notice. He graduated on June second and reported for the U.S. Army basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky on July first.

After basic training, Ron went to Fort Ord, California, for six weeks Advanced Individual Training. Then, he went to Hawaii for six weeks of jungle training, all in preparation for combat in Vietnam. He was assigned to the twenty-fifth Infantry Division that left for Vietnam by ship on January 3, 1966. Upon arrival, he was attached to Charlie Company, Second Battalion, and based at Cu Chi until December 1966.

After Vietnam, he went to Fort Hood, Texas, to await discharge on June 30, 1967. For his service, he received the National Defense Medal, Vietnam Campaign Ribbon, Vietnam Service Medal, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf, Good Conduct Medal, and Combat Infantry Badge. Since his return, Ron has traveled extensively throughout the nation "to see what he fought for." He has been jailed in twenty-seven states for brawling over his beliefs that he and others served honorably and deserve recognition for. He continues to fight for recognition for Vietnam Veterans. He is active in the Vietnam Veterans of America, Mahoning Valley Chapter one-hundred and thirty-five and has written a book, Reflections of a Wolfhound in Country.

A five year legal battle from 1983 to 1988 awarded him one-hundred percent Post Traumatic Stress Disability. Ron makes his home on an acre of land in Poland, Ohio, and he states, "The first two weeks (in Vietnam) changed me around to the man I am today."

P: This is an interview with Ronald A. Cartmell for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by Darlene Pavlock, on Friday, December 6, 1991, at 4:30 p.m.

We are going to start out with some simple basics. Where were you born and raised?

C: I was born and raised in Logan County, West Virginia. That is down by Tennessee, or the Kentucky border. Then, we moved over to Kentucky when I was six years old. I went to school there. Then, I was raised in the southern part of Ohio down by Portsmouth about thirty miles from Portsmouth.

P: These were all small towns?

C: Yes. As a matter of fact, I finished my schooling in a little town called Kohlberg, Ohio. I graduated in 1965. I was drafted two months before I graduated.

P: They drafted you before you graduated?

C: Well, we moved, and I had to start first grade, again. So, I was about twenty years old when I graduated.

P: So, you were ahead.

C: I went up and asked them about the draft. They said, "Yes, we will set it up for you." I graduated June second, and I was in Fort Knox on July first of the same year.

P: That was it. You did not even have thirty days out in the real world.

C: From there, I went to Fort Knox, for my Basic Training and Fort Ord, California, for my Advanced Infantry Training. From there, I went to Hawaii before I got with my division, the twenty-fifth Division. I got there in the middle of November 1965. I went down for six weeks of general training out on the big island. Then, we came back to Stowefield Barracks. About a week later, we shipped out to Vietnam.

P: So, you were drafted, and all of your training and everything was centered around going to Vietnam. That was where you went from there?

C: Yes.

P: No in between, I went to some other places.

C: I went to Stowefield. Well, I had a fifteen day leave after Basic Training. That was it. When I got to Stowefield, my order said eighteen months. I thought that was all that I

had left. It did not work out that way. I was in Stowefield about ten days. The whole time that I was over there, I was in the barracks. I went down to Pearl Harbor on a troop carrier and took about a two week ride to Vietnam.

P: They did not fly you over?

C: No, the Second Brigade Task Force was going over. We started a base camp at Cu Chi. The rest of the platoon came over in March. So, I was there from January to December. One year. I would say that the first two weeks changed me around into the way I am today. Yes.

P: What were you like before? What were your growing up years like? What type of personality did you have?

C: Just like normal kids do. I played football and things like that.

P: How many kids were in your family?

C: I had five brothers and two sisters.

P: That is a big family.

C: We came from the coal country, I guess.

P: So, it was not hard getting used to all of these guys around then? Gee.

C: I guess that I was just like any other normal kid. I do not know, but, the first two weeks changed me over there.

P: Now, you took the troop carrier. Where did you land?

C: Long Tau. We took the cattle cars. That was what we called them. You know, those Amphibians. Then, we hit the beach. When we got there, they let the gate down, and they started playing Hawaiian music. I said, "No, they did not put us out on the sea for two weeks to bring us to the islands." A guy said, "No, we are in Vietnam." We took trucks over to the air strip, and they flew us into Ta Tenu. When we got off of the troop carrier, the heat was so bad. It felt like peeling the skin off of you. It was about one-hundred and twenty degrees. It smelled like death.

P: I have heard about that.

C: Those were the first two things that got you. It was the smell of death and the unbearable heat. We stayed outside at Ta Tenu all week to wait for equipment to come in. Then, we

went into Cu Chi. It was not anything but rice paddies and woodlands. So, that was where we started our base camp.

P: You had to set it up yourself?

C: Yes. We had to go after the enemy to build our base camp. According to my lawyer, she read all of this stuff. She said that we were in contact two-hundred and eighty-nine days out of one year with the enemy.

P: Did you see them?

C: Oh, yes. I shot a few of them. They were young. I think the youngest one I killed was twelve, it looked like. They go in at seven [years old], and train. If they make it to twelve years, they're hardcore.

P: That was interesting because you see pictures and movies of everyone in bushes, or the illusion of everyone. Were they there or were they not there?

C: Ninety percent of the time, you did not see what you were shooting at. That is my guess. When you confront them, it is either take them out, or they will take you out. They are trained just like I am. The gooks, excuse my expression, but the gooks have no respect for the North Vietnamese Army. I respect the North Vietnamese Army. They were trained just as we were.

P: They were military soldiers with military tactics?

C: Yes.

P: Now, the gooks were different?

C: Yes. They did not have any respect for people. As we came up on a couple of American bodies, one was black and one was white. They cut their heads off, and they switched heads, or racial propaganda, I guess. It did not work. It just made us meaner is what it did.

P: You mentioned your personality change the first two weeks. What was your "new" personality?

C: Sandpaper we called it. It had taken its place. My best friend from is from California. I seen him go up in the air in about ten pieces. I picked him up in pieces. We had mortars going out, and they had rockets coming in. He was right in the middle. He was an RTO, or radio telephone operator. I just cannot seem to forget about it. I lived day to day. It seems like sometimes, for about a week, I had no bad days. When you least expect it,

something will set it off, like the smell of diesel, a chopper going over, or a loud noise. I jump. It is like that night I had a dream. I think that I was semi-conscious. I do not know. You wake up screaming and sweating. Nancy will get up with me and talk with me.

P: She seems to be understanding.

C: Oh, yes. I have been with her for eight years. I have had some hard times with her. I mean, not with her. It is me. The way that I blow up and everything. And, she has to take that. Sometimes, it really hurts.

P: Did you have a temper before you went into the service?

C: I do not think so. It was just a normal temper. I used to drink a lot when I got back. I would go through a case of beer and a fifth of whiskey in a day. That occurred for about ten years. Now, I slacked off. I will drink probably once a week. Yes, I used to do that every day for about ten years.

P: Mainly, because of being over there? Or, did you drink over there, too, and then, you just continued with it?

C: I drank over there but not that much.

P: You did not have it that much?

C: Right. The first three months we did not even have a shower.

P: What were your living conditions like?

C: Like I said, during the first three months, they gave you two canteens of fresh water. One to wash in and one to drink out of. In one-hundred and twenty-five degree weather, you are not going to wash. You are going to drink. If you went through a canal, you would have a towel and a little bar of soap on you, and you would wash as you were walking. You would do the best you could. At first, I was in a mortar platoon, or eighty-one Mortar. We would dig our holes, and that was where we would sleep at. We did not have any billets and that.

P: Did you have a poncho?

C: Oh, yes. That sucker will make you sweat. When it rains, I just took it off, threw it away, or gave it to some body. I did not want it anymore. You slept wherever you could. You would sleep at the most about four hours a day. Sometimes, none.

P: How many hours of movement did you have compared to your down time?

C: What are you talking about? Are you talking about patrols?

P: Yes.

C: Eight or nine hours. Eagle flights everyday.

P: What is an eagle flight?

C: We would go down to the helipad that morning, and we were supposed to come back that afternoon. They call that an Eagle Flight. You got out and hit a hot LZ or a cold LZ (Landing Zone), and you sweep about a ten mile radius. Then, you get back on the chopper, and you come back in. Sometimes, it did not work that way. Sometimes, you were out there for weeks. If you run into them, you will be fighting. There were a lot of them out there. We went out one time. We were supposed to be out for a day. They had to supply us with clothing and everything because the clothing was just rotting off of us.

P: Now, did you have a uniform? Fatigues?

C: Just green fatigues and jungle boots. We had regular basic training boots for a couple of months over there. They were heavy. You fill them up with water, and they get heavy.

P: How about your equipment and supplies? Did you have to carry that?

C: We usually carried an M-14 rifle. We usually carried all six magazines. That is one-hundred and twenty rounds on your waist. Then, you carry bandoliers with the rounds in it. It averaged out to anywhere from forty to eighty pounds that you were carrying around with you.

P: How much did you weigh when you were over there?

C: I weighed 160 pounds.

P: How much did you weigh when you came back?

C: When I came back, I was 155. I lost five pounds.

P: That is not bad.

C: No. They gave you salt tablets. You had to take them everyday. They gave us some other kind of white pill. I think that was speed or something to keep you awake. I said, "I do not mind this." Now, as far as doing dope, I tried it one time. They called it

Cambodian dope.

P: What was it like? Marijuana?

C: Yes, marijuana, but it was stronger. It was better. I tried it one time. I woke up the next morning, and I started shaking. I said, "This is not for me." I bought a carton of them for five dollars.

P: Was it sold in cartons like cigarettes?

C: Yes. I bought a carton for five dollars. We had nine bunkers. I was in a tower smoking. I was in a forty-foot tower. I would go down and trade cigarettes for beer and whiskey. I would stop at the tower when I was off. Well, they called it off-line. I would have a few drinks. I would go up there and get messed up. I did not care.

P: You had your own little world up there.

C: Oh, yes. I was up there one night at a place that I called the Million Dollar Strike. I was drinking. I was not on duty. I was in a tower, and it was called a Star Bright. If you looked through it, it was infrared. It looked like daylight when you looked through it.

P: So, you could see any movement down there?

C: Right. So, I was looking out at the wood line, and I saw this light out there. I turned it off, and I could not see it. I figured that he has got a star bright. He could see me, and I could see him. He has got one of our equipment. That got me hot. I called in the mortars. We started with the eighty-one mortars. And, I called in the artillery. I asked them what to call for, and I ordered a strike. They said, "What do you need that for?" I said, "Well, I think that we have got heavy concentration in the wood line." He says, "Turn down a three to five, and ask for Eagle." That was a code, Eagle. I turned down, and I said, "Eagle," It was a spotter plane. "Yes, what do you want?" I said, "No, they are messing with me, and I am drinking." I picked it back up, and I said, "North-south wood line. We have got heavy concentration." He said, "You got it." I just laid down and started laughing. Five minutes later, that wood line lit up with napalm. I said, "Oh, I am in Strouble." They were going to hang me the next day.

P: Did they go out and investigate that?

C: Yes.

P: How would you have gotten into trouble?

C: The Colonel from brigade wanted to know who authorized this.

- P: Oh. What was your rank?
- C: Private First Class. So, the Colonel came up, and I was cleaning a fifty and a sixty at the time. I was cleaning a fifty. I was having a beer, and I heard some arguing. Here, this Colonel from brigade comes. He was in spit-shined boots. He was a perfect target. He was raising hell with my Commanding Officer, and I did not like it. Because this man, or my commanding officer, was great, he would not let his men do anything he would not do. That 'was how he took it. I turned the fifty on the Colonel's back, and my Commanding Officer shook his head so I would turn it back around. He looked back at me again, and I cranked it further. I was getting ready to hit the butterfly, or the trigger. If he had not waved me off, I would have busted that man right there. I would have thrown him out in the wire and told them that the gooks killed him.
- P: Was there a lot of that? You hear that there was.
- C: I heard about it, but our company was so tight. We had multi-languages in our platoon. Any race that you could think of we had in this one company.
- P: How many were in your company?
- C: I think about one-hundred and eighty men.
- P: A lot of diverse people?
- C: Yes. Well, the original ones went over on a boat, or a troop carrier. Within six months, we were down to eighty of them from the original ones.
- P: Are you kidding?
- C: That was scarier than anything. I do not know anybody who said that they were not scared over there or did not cry. You have got to watch. I cried. I wet in my pants. It is a thing that you have got to live with once you adapt to it. You have got to adapt to that environment. Once you do that, you get to where you think that nobody can touch you. That is the way that I lived.
- P: You build that around you?
- C: Yes. When you kill somebody, you just block that out.
- P: That was your way of survival?
- C: Yes. Survival was the name of the game.

P: Did you think of home when you were there?

C: I thought of home a lot of times.

P: What images of home did you carry?

C: A lot of the ones when I left. I went out in the world when I got out of school for about twenty-eight days. I just stayed in a small town. I did not know anything about the rest of the United States or the world. So, I just built my image there on that.

P: What was the image?

C: Chasing the girls that I was with in high school, getting back home, building a '57 Chevy, and stuff like that. When I got back home, it seemed like I aged five years more than the guys that I had graduated with. They were still dragging up and down Main Street. I thought it was stupid.

P: Did you build your '57 Chevy?

C: I bought one. They had one down there. I think that I paid about seven-hundred dollars for it. It was a nice one.

P: That was a nice car.

C: I should have kept it.

P: But you did not?

C: No.

P: You were too old for that.

C: I know it.

P: Those images of home, did you think about them often? Or, did you try to put them in the past?

C: No. I put them aside. I wrote to my mom about three times the whole year that I was there. I did not want to worry her. This is the way that I was thinking, I did not want to worry her. If I said the least little thing, like I got shot or something, that would probably tear her up.

P: Did she write to you at all?

C: She sent me canned goods and everything, which were better than those C-rations.

P: That is what I wanted to ask you about. I know how you lived in the bush. What did you eat?

C: We ate C-rations, or if we were coming up on a village that had a farm, we would take the cucumbers. We would wipe them off and eat them whole. We would have given anything for fresh vegetables. We did not know it, but we were eating that dioxide stuff that they sprayed the vegetables with.

P: The Agent Orange?

C: Yes. If you ever see an eyewitness to the Vietnam War, I think that it was put out by the UTI. It would show in their pictures when they first sprayed it. Then, five years later, there was nothing. I mean, the ground was even cracking. You had a whole beautiful forest there, and then, five years later, the ground was tracking. There were no trees. I think what they did was use Dow Chemical. They put the drums out, and I am pretty sure that they would dilute it so much percentage-wise. Then, it all had to go, and they just dumped it in and sprayed it. They wanted to clear it out real fast

P: They did not follow the directions?

C: No. That is my belief.

P: That was too drastic of a measure for that large of an area to be totally annihilated in that quick of a period of time.

C: I have never seen Vietnam from a chopper like that. It is beautiful.

P: Is it?

C: Oh, yes. It is a beautiful country.

P: Tell me your impressions on it. What did it look like?

C: It reminded me of the hills in Kentucky and West Virginia. You could just sit up there and look out. There were not any doors on a chopper, so you could hang your feet out. Once you got down on the ground, it was a different story. When you were up in the air, that relieved you a little bit.

P: That is how you were relieved? That and when you were in your tower?

C: Yes.

P: Tell me about your tower. Was it an observation tower?

C: Yes.

P: They were just built out there?

C: Yes.

P: And, what could you see?

C: Yes, they were built behind the perimeter, or behind the bunker. You could see a pretty good distance. Then, you could lay down on the bunker, look up, and watch shooting stars go over. You could watch Sputnik go over it at that time. You could see all that. There were so many stars over there. You would not believe.

P: I had no idea.

C: When you got in the Monsoon, that was a different story. That was about four months straight everyday. It would down-pour for about five minutes, and then, it would quit. The sun would come out. In half-an-hour, it would dry. I was down in two, three, and four Corps in the delta area. That was the wet part of it. A friend of mine who was in our chapter was in delta. I still got some of that with me. Every now and then, my feet will sweat, which they are doing now.

P: Because of the heat?

C: Yes. I go home and soak them, and I put that stuff on that the V.A. gave me. That controls it a little bit. It breaks out often or every now and then.

P: So, your living conditions were harsh?

C: Very harsh.

P: What was your typical day like?

C: Just walking, taking the land, and going out on eagle flights every other day. Just watching out for Charlie. We built our base camp over a tunnel that was twenty-five thousand meters of tunnel and five tiers high. The book entitled The Tunnels of Cu Chi showed you how the tunnels were very complex right when you opened the cover..

P: I knew that Cu Chi was built on top of the tunnels, so to speak, but I did not realize that they were that deep and that sophisticated.

C: I was down in a few of them. If you get down in there, they go straight down. You can put your feet on the side, and you ease yourself down. You take your bayonet, and you tap a few holes on the bottom. Once you get down in there, you look at the entrance of the tunnel and check the top. They have got what they call a three-step snake. It was a banana snake about that long. If you walk three steps with one bite, then, you are history. That is how potent the snake is. They tie them in there because when you crawl in there, there are spiders and cobras.

P: How did you learn about all this?

C: O.J.T, on the job training. You just see them. I shot a cobra. I saw it come through the water. I said, "I have never seen a leech that big." They do have leeches over there which are pretty big. I put about ten rounds in that cobra.

P: Did your weapons work for the most part?

C: Oh, yes. As long as you kept them greased well. The grease was waterproof. Sometimes, they would jam, but for the most part, they worked good. Then, they brought what I called the Maddy Matel. It was an M-16. That sucker jammed all of the time. I turned it back in. It was a lighter weapon, and it put out good fire power. When they made the barrel, they did not make it big enough. See, when you put the shell in the barrel, the shell will expand. It jammed. When you need it, you are not going to have a weapon. They took them back, and they redid them after they tested them. Somebody could have gotten killed. A typical day was just like I told you. You get used to things that you would never think about. Playing with mines and passing grenades around like a baseball.

P: That is what I wanted to ask you. How did you occupy your time when you were there?

C: Yes. We drank. When we were off-line, we drank. If we could get a hold of a softball and a bat, we played softball. You know, stuff like that. We just sat back and relaxed. You had the most fun that you could. Because, of course, tomorrow, you might not be around.

P: You never knew from moment to moment?

C: That was it. You were on alert twenty-four hours a day, really. If you did not get in the fast lane, everything moves slow. When you would get in a fire fight, it seemed like it lasted for an hour. It probably only lasted five minutes. You can put out a lot of rounds in five minutes, especially with an M-60.

P: How did you feel when it was over, especially after an initial operation?

C: I felt good.

P: Did you feel elated? Tired?

C: No, I did not feel tired. I felt good. I felt like I could keep going. I felt pumped up, like flying, I guess. Then, you would come back, sit there, and have a beer. We did not drink all of the time. I would say in the whole year over there, I probably got drunk twice.

P: That is not much at all.

C: You did not have time, really.

P: Did you start smoking there?

C: No, I was smoking when I was thirteen years old. Thirty-four years, I am still going strong.

P: Ron, what major events stand out at this time?

C: Of the war? When I was over there?

P: Yes. What would you consider as a major event?

C: Everyday was a major event. Just staying alive. When we found out where the Viet Cong were at, instead of going out and hitting a hot LZ, we would go and find them. They were in the wood lines. We knew. We had five choppers, and we sent them in different directions. We had thirty-four bodies, and five were alive.

P: What did you do with the five?

C: They take them back in the field and everything.

P: What did you do with the thirty-four?

C: The bodies? Stack them up in a big net. Then, a crane would come in, pick them up, take them away, and do something with them. They would bury them or do something with them. Burn them or whatever. Or, put them in big long trenches, throw lime on them, and burn them. There was one event. Well, that was the same event. They caught one of them or two of them out of the company. It was a black man who was eighteen years old. The Vietnamese had him two months. They took his boots off of him, put a ring in his nose, and put bamboo behind his back with his arms. That is how they led him around for two months. When we found him, he was down in a hole. I looked in. He was brain dead. His eyes were real cold, and he would not blink or anything. I turned around, and I

shot two more who were like that. I do not know what clicked in me, but it did. I figured that man was not going to have a life. They were not going to have any life. They were going to have to reprogram him before they let him out. I flash back a lot of times. If a man like that flashes back, he could kill somebody and not even know it. That was the worst part. You are in a war, and twenty-three hours later, you are out on the streets. There was no de-programming. They would just drop you out. That was it. I came back in the same fatigues that I was out in the jungle with the day before.

P: How did you know that you were coming home?

C: They came out and got me. They said, "You are rotating." I said, "We are in a fire fight, and I am not getting out." He said, "You better get on that chopper." I was carrying an M-60, at the time, and I gave my assistant gunner my gun. I took off running to that chopper. He was about two feet off of the ground. I dove in that thing. I said, "Get outta here. I am going!" So, they sent me to Ta Tenu. That is out of TWA to Oakland.

P: What did they do with you in Oakland? Process you quickly?

C: Yes. Quickly. It was like a production line. It was winter for me, so they gave me dress greens. By the time you got to the end of the line, they had a steak dinner for you and a beer if you wanted it. In a half an hour, you would be redressed and everything. It was just one big building, just like a production line. Shirts here, shorts there, and socks there. Your money would be waiting for you at the end of the line, too.

P: Really? They had that all figured out?

C: Yes.

P: I cannot get over that. Then, they gave you a plane ticket home?

C: No, you bought your own plane ticket. Military standby. That was pretty much it. I do not know. When I left, it was about an hour difference the same day, or a third day ahead. When I got back here, it was about an hour difference when I hit Oakland. I was thinking, "I got these fatigues." I was tearing them off, and I did not care.

P: Did you have R & R while you were there?

C: Yes. I want to Bangkok, Thailand for five days. I wanted to go to Australia, but that was for the big brass, I guess. I did not want to go.

P: You did not? You were that seasoned? You did not want to leave your buddies?

C: I figured one of them would get killed because I left. I still believe that. When I came

home, my step brother was killed in September of 1966. He is on the memorial down there. He was from North Jackson. Red Cross got a hold of him, and I flew to Vegas because he wanted to be buried where his mom was at. So, we get there. My mom was married to his dad. His ex-wife was there, and his mother and his brother, George, were there, too. He lives in Cortland. It took a week to bury him because they were arguing over the insurance money. I am not kidding. I will never forget that.

P: Then, they flew you back?

C: Yes. I saw him for about a week. They said, "You can rotate out now, if you want." I said, "No, I am going to go back. I have got to finish something."

P: Really? How long had you been there at that time?

C: Nine months.

P: So, you only had three more? And you went back?

C: I went back. I told mom, "I am going to kill as many as I can before they get anyone else." They killed a few before I got back.

P: Why do you think you felt that way?

C: The body came in with his brother, George. They put George on the plane with his brother's body. It was there the day we got there. They got in the motel room, and they were talking. I got mad. I am not going to say what I said.

P: You can if you want.

C: I just told them, "Excuse my mom and George here. The rest of you guys, 'Fuck Off!' I think this is sick sitting here arguing about the insurance money because George is going to get it." They made each other beneficiaries, but they did not know that. So, I went down and got myself a room a couple rooms down, and I said, "If anybody comes in here, I am going to kill them." I only went out of that room to eat, get beer and whiskey, and go back in. My mom came in and talked to me. I just let her and George come in. Anybody else, I did not let come in. They had a Marine Corps Colonel there. I would not even let him come in. I said, "I will kill you if you come in here."

P: When you are in a situation like that, do you then you go into pettiness?

C: I asked him. I said, "Is that all I am worth? Ten-thousand dollars?"

P: Was it hard to deal with?

- C: Yes. I asked my mom. She started crying. I know that I hurt her on that. We talked for a while.
- P: You flew back to your old company when you got back?
- C: Oh, yes.
- P: Did they welcome you back?
- C: Yes. They said, "What the hell are you doing here? We thought that you would stay home." I said, "No, I had to come back and kill a few." That was when the men in my company told me that my buddy just got killed. He was from Cleveland. He got killed. He took it right in the chest. I said, "Who in the hell was the RTO?" When they told me, I went over and hit that man. I did not even know him. He was a new guy. I said, "Why did you get that FO killed for, you son of a bitch?" I said, "I am going to kill you." It was a natural reaction. I was close to him. One thing that should not have happened was me getting close.
- P: Did you guys get close?
- C: Oh, real close. He used to call me "Whitie," and I used to call him "Nigger". That was how close we were. Because when we went out on night patrol, we would put our backs to each other. We had a few of them. I cannot call them nigger because he was the best, just like I was the best. I am not bragging or anything, but I was the best.
- P: You are being very truthful. There is a difference. You would not be here if you were not the best.
- C: That is right.
- P: You came home to Oakland, California, and you flew back. We can go wherever you want.
- C: I will start after I got out of the service. I got out in June of 1967. I started working over at General Motors. My stepfather got me a job that lasted a week. Somebody called me a son of a bitch, and I just turned around and hit him. You know how they harass you and put you on ninety days. I was not going to take that. I took that in the Army, and I am not going to take it out in civilian life. Mary and I went to Plymouth, Ohio. We lived there for a while. The first five years after I got back, I hitch-hiked all over the country. I slept anywhere that I could, in the desert or under overpasses.
- P: Just to see the country?

C: Yes. To see what I fought for.

P: Really, that was good.

C: I hitch-hiked probably halfway across the country, and I did not stop anywhere for more than three or four months. Saved up money and took off again. Since 1985, I had about seventy-seven thousand dollars.

P: Now, when you were in Vietnam, you had images of what home was like while you were there. Whether you thought about it all the time or not, I am not sure. Sometimes you did, and sometimes, you did not. Then, you came home. How did those images change? What did you think?

C: When I got off the plane in Oakland and San Francisco, they were throwing stuff at us and calling us baby killers. Of course, I fell off of the plane drunk. I took five people down on the ground with me, too. There were two-hundred soldiers on this plane coming back. Before we left Saigon, we asked the man if we could take whiskey on board. You could get a quart of Seagram's Seven over there for one-dollar and ten cents down at the commissary. He said, "Yes." Everybody took these. He said, "We have got an hour before we take off." We went over there, cleaned that top shelf out, and got on that plane. He said, "You cannot break it until we get in the air." Boy, we had a good time. The first round eyes that we had seen in a year. They earned their pay. They took us over to the barracks until it was time to process through. It was a couple days, but you could not get off of the base, just like here. They had guards all around.

P: We were talking about the changes when you got off the plane, all those people throwing things at you.

C: It was the hippie movement. One guy said, "Why did they not let us keep the M-14's, so that we could have target practice here?" After all that, I had to look for jobs when I got out of Vietnam. I was hoping just for labor, but I could not get it. When I went to get interviewed, he said, "You are a Vietnam Vet?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, we will let you know." "What do you mean you will let me know?" I said, "I know that the job is open." He said, "I will let you know."

P: You ran into a lot of that?

C: Oh, yes. That was when I started hating the population. I could safely say that I have been in jail in twenty-seven states for fights. Somebody would come up and start calling me a baby killer and all that. I would hit them in a bar. I would have to go to jail. I would pay to get out. Now, I just do not go out that much. I used to, but now, I just stay at home. I have Nancy go grocery shopping. I just do not need this. I have an acre and a half of lawn. I call that my home. I check it twice a night.

P: Do you?

C: Yes. I check it twice a night.

P: What do you check it for?

C: I check it for people walking around. I carry a weapon, yes. I will shoot them. Not too long ago last year, I had this puppy-love thing going with my daughter and her ex-boyfriend.

P: How old is your daughter?

C: A few years back, I think that she was sixteen or seventeen. I call her my daughter. When me and Nancy got her, she was fourteen. From eight years old to fourteen years old, her step-dad was raping her. He is doing two life-sentences, now. He is not getting out. It took her six months to talk to me in the same house. I would joke around with her a little bit, and she came out. She started trusting me. Then, she started calling me dad. I had to sign a paper before I started anywhere. She started calling me dad. That made me feel good. She is the only family that I ever had. She is doing real good now.

P: So, she had this puppy-love thing?

C: Yes. He came up on the porch. She said, "No, somebody is looking in the door." I had every light on in the house. I said, "Okay, I will stop this. I will make more than a phone call." The guy was standing there wanting to argue. I said, "I am not arguing with you. If you come on the porch, I am going to blow you off with a shot gun. No questions asked." I did not want to hear any of this bullshit. I said, "If anybody gets on my property, I am going to kill them." I have not had any problems with that kid around here since. I do not want to do it, but I figure that I have to protect what I have got.

P: So, you have a house and an acre of land?

C: I am going to protect it because that is what I have got. If I have to go back to the old way, I will.

P: When you decided that you had done all of your traveling, that took you five years. So, you came here and settled down? No?

C: No, I started driving a truck. I started driving a truck in 1975. I spent about twelve years on the road. I just stayed on the road. I started driving for a company called C & H out of Dallas, Texas. I drove for them for six years. I drove for McNicholas down here when the steel mills were going, and with C & H, I went to forty-nine states and six provinces. I saw my boss about three times a year. He would send me money, and I would party.

When there was a problem, I would spend three-hundred dollars a weekend. That happened probably about once a month if there was a lay-over. I would call him and have him wire me four-hundred dollars.

P: Do you feel that that was how you adapted?

C: That was the only way to survive. Just to keep traveling. Now, I have been with Nancy for about eight years.

P: How did you meet?

C: Bingo, of all things. I was working, and I was supposed to be there now. I hit for five-hundred dollars last night. I was working in 1983 at an old roller rink in Lake Milton across from a party bar. The American Legion had bingo there. I said, "Well, you work a couple nights, and that will pay your dues for the year." I said, "Alright." So, I met her there, and we went out to Bronco Billy's and had a few drinks. That was on a Saturday night. Then, she woke me up Sunday, and said, "Let's go see the Oak Ridge Boys." I said, "Where at?" She said, "Ponderosa Park." I said, "Get outta here." She said, "Get up!" We got out there at about ten o'clock. We got grass seats. We had a nice picnic table under a big tree with a couple of cases of beer. We stayed there until midnight. We watched both shows.

P: So, you hit it off right away?

C: I came home Monday, and I had the State Patrol looking for me. Vietnam Vets, my chapter was looking for me. Nancy said, "Well, you better call your mom, and tell her where you are at." I said, "I am thirty-nine years old, and I can stay out here." They had everybody out looking for me. I was out at Ponderosa Park getting drunk and watching the Oak Ridge Boys. I could not believe that. After that, we started dating. We moved in, and we have been together ever since.

P: You moved into Nancy's place?

C: Yes.

P: So, you got your little bag and moved right over?

C: Yes. She said, "I do not mind." I said, "Alright, whatever."

P: That is great.

C: We have had our hard times, though.

- P: Do you feel that the hard times were more because of Vietnam than the actual normal course of life?
- C: Yes. It was hard. Most of it was Vietnam. She did not know how to handle it at first, when I woke up screaming. Like when I pulled her on the floor one night and told her, "The gooks were here." When I woke up, I was laying on top of her. One day, I knew that my daughter was at school and Nancy was at work, and I heard footsteps. I got my weapons alongside the bed. My M-16. I went out, and I loaded it. Fifteen-round clips. I went down that hall, and I turned around. If anybody was in there, I would have killed them. It was not locked.
- P: There was nobody there?
- C: I got real nervous, and I was sweating.
- P: Sure. Did we discuss how you adapted to changes?
- C: Well, I did not adapt back here. I adapted in Vietnam. I have been living that ever since for twenty-five years.
- P: That was where it was and where you have stayed?
- C: Yes. I would not mind going back and trying to find a few POWs. If I could go back and get one POW out, it would be no problem even if they dusted me off and killed me. I would not mind dying. I lived my freedom for about twenty-five years, and this guy has been in for twenty-five or whatever. I would give my life up for his freedom.
- P: Why do you think that you have lived it all these years? Was it because of combat?
- C: Yes. That and I am not going to say putting my defenses down. It was mostly the combat, and the hurt that goes with it, I guess. I do not want to forget. Every time I see them, I have memories. I do not care if he is Japanese or Korean. I call them all gooks.
- P: Because of what you have seen and what you have been through?
- C: Yes. There were kids over there. I think that was the worst part of it. I was friendly with a few of them. I sat down and talked to them. If they would get too friendly, Charlie would come that night and cut their arms off. There was a village that special forces went in and inoculated all of the kids with tetanus shots. The next day, they came back, and they cut their arms off. They came to us to get help. Then, Charlie came that night. I guess that the young men were helping them out and made them fight.
- P: Now, was this guerrilla, or did they recruit them?

- C: Guerrilla. They made them fight. They shot a sniper out of the tree. He was chained to it. He did not have any recourse but to shoot. You see stuff like that. Then, if they did not fight, they would kill them. They would torture them to death. You would either do it, or you would die. You were going to die anyway. Some of the men that I have seen who were tortured, I just wanted to take a .45 and just shoot them. They were half dead. If I could save them, I would go ahead, but to me, they looked like they would not make it.
- P: Did you ever find out if they did?
- C: No. They never do. Well, a couple of them. They were hit pretty bad. The medics come up, and they take them up in a chopper. Some of them made it back, and some of them did not
- P: Were you wounded there?
- C: No. I was close but never wounded. I jumped out of a chopper. We were going into an LZ, and we got down by the berm. I was stepping out. He raised up real fast, like about ten feet, and I hurt my back. That was the only injury that I got. I was close to getting killed, though. We were out in this woodline. We had a fire fight that night. The next day, they would come in, the FO. We moved seventy-five yards back. This shrapnel come through. Me and this guy were sitting on the down tree eating C-rations, and a shrapnel cut his helmet strap. I dove to the ground. When I crawled up, a piece hit right in front of me. It was still hot. I started getting shell-shock. They were not letting up. Hours and hours went by without help, but, finally, they let up. We went in, and they wiped everything out. When we got in there, B-52's came in. Two-thousand pound blockbusters was what we called them. When they hit, they pulled the oxygen out of the air. Before we got in, we saw the crater. When we were there, we were in a fire fight. After that was over, here comes this little girl about ten years old. How she survived, I do not know. She did not have any shoes on. She was shell shocked. They told me that the chopper was coming to take her back. So, I picked her up, and she was still screaming. I did not know how to say calmed down. I walked halfway back, and a soldier came off, got her, and took her back. How she lived, I never can figure it out to this day.
- P: I think that we covered all of the questions.
- C: I did not tell you this. While training in Hawaii, when we got back out of jungle training on the big island two days before Christmas, the CO called us out. He said, "Merry Christmas, you are going to Vietnam." He gave us a three-day pass. It lasted that night. We tore the town up. When we got outside of the base, we got into a big fight. We must have because I was hurting the next day. Then, we started tearing the barracks up. Then, we left January 5, a few days after New Years. I did not get off of the base. For Christmas, I went over to the USO Show. They had some good shows there. I would go

to the M-Club. I called my mom on base and told her that I was going. That was it. The thing that they did to us was they put us on a troop carrier that night, and they did not wake us up until it was a mile out. If anyone tried to go AWOL, they said, "Well, look at Pearl Harbor for the last time. That is the last time you are going to see it." The man was right. I had not seen it in twenty-five years. About my images when I came home, I could not understand it. When we got back here, my images of the American dream were shattered. People protesting and all that. People were dying over there, and people over here were fighting. I just did not like it. I still hate Jane Fonda. I do not see why she went down there. This year they asked her about it. She tried to say that she was sorry, but she did not. She would not do it. She said that she was naive at the time. The movie, Golden Pond, was her make up with her father. I never watch any movies that she is in.

P: Do you watch any Vietnam movies?

C: Yes. I have a few of them at home. I watched Platoon when it came out. That was my favorite. It brought back a lot of memories.

P: Was it pretty close to being realistic?

C: It was close, real close. That and Hamburger Hill were the two best Vietnam movies put out so far. Did you ever see Hamburger Hill? Now, this is a true count. In 1968, the one-hundred and first Airborne was up north, and they were going to take this hill. All of the politicians back in D.C. like Bobby Kennedy and everybody said that they cannot take it. They took it. You have got to watch that movie.

P: I have seen Platoon six times.

C: I have seen it about twenty times. I taped it when it came on HBO. That was accurate. The leveling of the villages and all that. Some things in there I did not like about it, like the dope and all that. The drinking was good. They used dope over there, but they did not use it quite as much out in the field. Well, our company did not. We made a pact with each other. "You get back here, and you can get wasted all you want. But, out there, you better be straight." That was the way that we had it. If one man messes up, you are all dead. You cannot drink and go out. That heat will get you. You will be sick. You can get malaria and everything. I think that I got sick once while I was over there. It was not real bad. I got a lot of V.D., though. I hated them shots. They give you one, and they would say, "Come back in two days, and we will give you a booster." I said, "I might not be here in two days." Then, they would hit you with both of them. They would cure it up. Hey, you figure, you are ninety days out in the bush, and them old ladies start to look good. Hey, give me a break. When you go back into the village, you got to take your chances.

P: That is wild. You probably had more black and blue marks from the shots than you did

from the operations.

C: Some of them girls were not even of age. They started at nine years old on up.

P: Really, I had somebody else tell me that.

C: They had their own mothers selling them out. They knew that we would give them a lot of money. I do not know why they did that. I guess that when the Russians came in, they were not giving them anything. When Vietnam Veteran's, an American Organization, had trips going on, they had asked me to go. I said, "I am not going." I am not paying twenty-seven hundred dollars to go over there when I went for free the first time. What is this? I heard that their trying to make relations good there, now. Where I was at? In the tunnels of Cu Chi? That is a tourist spot. It is a monument. You could walk right down in them, now.

P: No snakes or booby traps?

C: You got bats and stuff now, inside of them.

P: Well, I think that we covered everything. Is there anything you would like to add that I did not ask?

C: One thing that I would like to add. When we came back, we had this stigma with us that we were baby killers and all that. And, no recognition. What would have happened if they would have deprogrammed us, like World War II. When they were going home, they put them away, and they deprogrammed them for about a month before they shipped them home. They got about two months to come into civilization. They did not do that to us. In less than twenty-four hours, you are out in the world, man. Good Luck. That was it.

P: Even now, after all of these years, it was just finally starting to turn a little bit.

C: When I came back, I had about six months at Fort Hood, Texas. I did not get off of that base. Then, they started playing jungle warfare. I said, "Get outta here." I said, "I am not playing this." So, they made one-quarter of the base all Vietnam Veterans. They put us in tanks and tracks. Basic training did not want to have jungle warfare with us. We went down and got live ammunition and everything. We were in trouble. We captured their Colonel. Stripped him down to his skiddies and staked him out in the desert. All night. We got this kid who just got out of basic. We told him to put the helmet on and the fatigues. He said, "I will get in trouble impersonating an officer." We said, "Do it. We will back you up." Everybody was shooting this kid. So, needless to say, the next day, there was a big line going up to the Captain's office. Article fifteen, everybody. I said, "I do not mind. I got two weeks, and I am out." I do not care.

- P: What a shock from Vietnam to Texas. Although, the climates are about the same.
- C: Yes. In summer, it is. I would have stayed in the Army, but when I got into Vietnam, there was no place to go. They put me on the radio, and they put an M-60 in my hand. I was the target. That was the fire power of the squad.
- P: Now, you do not get as close to people as you did then?
- C: It took me about five years to tell Nancy that I loved her.
- P: Really, even though you did care for her?
- C: Yes. She did not understand why I did not want to get that close. Then, after a while, it fell into place. I just could not come out and say it. Well, the main thing was getting hurt again. One thing I can say is that I do not want to be this way, but when you are trained, you are trained.
- P: You have a lot of control. How did you build that up?
- C: It took years. When I go in a bar, someone comes up to me and tries to start something with me, I tell them straight off. I say, "If you mess with me, I am going to kill you." The bottom line. A lot of people walk away from me. A few of them found out. Now, I did not kill them, but they knew. They had to go to the hospital.
- P: Smarties that have not really seen the light?
- C: Yes. So, before I got with Nancy, the first couple years I was out in bars a lot.
- P: Were you married before?
- C: I was married twice before Nancy came along because I could not settle in one place at one job. I just signed the papers and said, "Bye." Then, she said, "Bye," to me. I still like to travel. Nancy never did.
- P: You did not go that much?
- C: No. I go to D.C. every year for Veteran's Day. I have been going since 1983. Usually, I went twice a year, Memorial Day and Veteran's Day. Then, it got a little expensive, and I just cut it down to Veteran's Day. We will take off this summer and go up to the New England states. Look around. We have never been up there except driving through.
- P: Now, do you still drive trucks?

C: No. I am on one-hundred percent disability.

P: And, how long have you been on that?

C: Since 1988.

P: Really. And, that was what Margaret got for you?

C: Yes. I got one-hundred percent VA, and one-hundred percent social security. I have to go see them about every three years. I do not like it because they break me. I start crying.

P: Why, just from the questions they ask you?

C: Yes. How did it happen? What happened?

P: Where do you go? Cleveland?

C: Yes. I go to Brecksville. I was up there for a three day thing. I did not like that too well.

P: What do they do?

C: They evaluate you. They watch you. I got a corner and a bed, and I turned it sideways. I told the people in the ward, "Do not come across this bed. I will kill you." I said, "Leave me alone," and I did not talk to anybody for three days. Then, on the last day, they get you in this room with five of them. They start you off, like one guy starts and then, this woman. About an hour after spilling my guts and breaking me, she said, "Were you in Vietnam?" Guess what I did? I picked up that metal chair, and I barreled it against the wall. I said, "I am outta here. I am walking right now." They must have pressed a button because security was there. I said, "Just sign my papers because I am going to walk out of this hospital one way or the other, or they will carry me out." They started getting all nervous, and I said, "Fuck you, people." Now, I do not go up there unless I have to.

P: Unless they come and get you, so to speak?

C: Yes, unless they send me a schedule.

P: I do not blame you.

C: I do not want to go.

P: I do not blame you.

- C: The National Board came to Cleveland. I sat in there, and they tape you just like you are taping. Margaret has got a tape, so she asked the question. They sat across from her. The guy running it must have been a Freedom Vet from Vietnam. The girl was sitting there with two tapes in her lap. They broke me down. The guy was asking questions. Margaret asked all the questions. Whatever they wanted to ask me, they would ask. The girl got up and walked the other way because I was crying. They had a lawyer up there. I came across something. I was about this far from his face. I said, "If there was a window here, you would be out of it." The guy grabbed me and said, "Calm down." I said, "I am not calming down. This asshole is not worth shit." Then, the psychoanalyst there asked me four questions. He said, "I got enough now. Get out of here." I said, "What do you mean you got enough? You just met me an hour ago. You do not know what I am like." He said, "No, I have enough. You can just leave. Go home." So, I went out, sat there, and calmed down a little bit. Nancy was there with me. They interviewed her, too. I said, "Let us get out of here and go have a beer." And, that was it. The guy came out, shook my hand, and said, "I am sorry about that." I said, "You got to do what you got to do." He smiled. I was fine.
- P: You can be friends, but they have to get you. Or, you have to get them.
- C: Right. We are all up to date, now.
- P: How does that make you feel when they break you like that?
- C: Well, you go in not trusting them. One thing Maggie told me, "Do not trust these people because they will stab you in the back." It was true. It was definitely true. I went in hating them.
- P: Just to keep the wall up?
- C: Yes, and I would tell them, too. They got me on tape in D.C. "m-fing" everybody.
- P: I can understand that.
- C: See, Maggie brings her tape recorder to compare tapes and see if anything is cut out. Sometimes, they will do that. They will change it right there in D.C. They sent me that letter saying, "We are sorry," and I am unemployable. All that due to PTSD chronic, which is chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Social Security even took my medical card from me.
- P: How did you get here?
- C: Medical card. Not my driver's license.

P: Okay, I was thinking, "Wait a minute?" Sorry.

C: Then, that was all that they were going to pay me. If they were going to do that, they were going to pay me. "I am going after it." I told Maggie, "Let us go." I got with Maggie in 1984. It took five years.

P: It took that long?

C: Yes. I went back in, and they were going over the same questions.

P: Just to break you down so that you would give up?

C: That was it. They wanted you to give up. They still do today. They are cutting a lot of stuff out in the V.A. They are starting to send us insurance forms now. They want you to fill out what kind of insurance you have. If it is non-service connected, they will bill your insurance company. I cannot believe that. They get one-billion dollars a year. They are the biggest hospital in the world, but they have a note down there that says, "Do not hurt your insurance service." I am not putting anything down. I do not have any insurance, only you people.

P: You have really given me a lot of insight.

C: I do not believe that I am talking this way.

P: Why? You do not usually?

C: I am just proud of myself. I was running around the mills there thinking about it. "Okay, let us get it over with." See, I am in the fast lane now. That is about enough, I think.

P: Well, thank you for doing the interview.

C: You are welcome.

End of Interview