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Kluis, Dave

Tim Wheatly

Northwestern College - Orange City

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Narrator's name: Dave Kluis

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Interviewer's name: Tim Wheatly

For: Northwestern College, History 351: America and the Vietnam War

TW: This April 1st, 2007. I'm speaking with Mr. Dave Kluis. He's a Vietnam veteran. He served in the year 1969; he's just here to tell his story today. Mr. Kluis, can you tell us a little bit about your background growing up?

DK: Well, I was born and raised just a half mile outside of town here right on Highway 75. My brother lives out there on the farm now. I went through school here through my freshmen year; we had our own high school and everything here in Maurice. We re-organized with Orange City, and my last three years of high school I went to Orange City. It was M-OC at that time.

Shortly after I got out of high school I joined the National Guard, a unit in Sheldon. I was second mechanized battalion of the 133rd infantry; our battalion headquarters was in Sioux City. We had units in Sioux City, LeMars, Cherokee, Sheldon, and Ida Grove. We were called up to duty for many different things. I served in flood control; I served after some tornados; I served in riot control at Okoboji at one time, and then our entire unit was activated. Just our battalion was taken from the state of Iowa, and the whole state of Kansas National Guard was activated at the same time. We were all sent to Fort Carson in Colorado. There we were trained and reorganized, you might say, as one unit, and then as we were needed orders were sent down to go to Vietnam. By far the majority of our unit went to Vietnam. Several of us that went over there together knew each other. We had been born and raised here in the same area, some of the fellows went to school together and stuff like this, but then we all got sent to Vietnam at the same time.

In the National Guard, I was a track and vehicle mechanic. That means you worked on anything with tracks: tanks, armored personal carriers, and also the vehicles meant jeeps, three quarter tons, deuce and a half trucks, five ton trucks, anything that was a wheeled vehicle. We were trained in both of those when I was in active duty the first time. In Fort Carson, Colorado, we just worked in the motor pool there. We were trained more extensively in tracks and trucks, and then when I was called to Vietnam it was to work in the motor pool over there. So at least I got sent to do what I was trained for; a lot of guys didn't.

TW: How did you grow up like? Were your parents involved in military service, do you come from a military background? Or were you drafted? Or how did that come about?

DK: No, my father was born in Holland. He was eight years old when he came to America. They landed, of course came through the island in New York. My grandfather was a baker, and he started bakeries in a lot of towns around here including Orange City, but my dad became a framer. And they moved on to the Midwest and my grandpa came with a brother of his and his brother's family and they stayed on the East Coast. My mother was born in this country but her mother was born in Holland. They came to the Midwest to be farmers. My dad met my mom in Minnesota, they were both on the farms up there, and then they got married and moved down here. They farmed first north of Orange City and then came here by Maurice, bought a farm here.

Neither of my parents had anything to do with military; of course, my father they wouldn't accept him even if he wanted to get in because he wasn't a natural born citizen; he was born overseas. So he couldn't even get into the service. Since he was a farmer during the Second World War, they tried to keep the farmers home because they needed the food provided here in this country. Then my two brothers, they didn't go into the service; they were both college students so they weren't drafted. My two brothers-in-law that married my two sisters – they were both in the military, both in the army. I enlisted in this National Guard unit which was army guard and then our unit was activated, so I that's how I got into full-time service.

TW: As far as enlisting in the National Guard instead of maybe like the Navy or something was there something that was there a reason why you enlisted in the National Guard above the other branches you could have enlisted in?

DK: Well, I think mainly it was just that it was so handy here just a few miles away. At that time we just had meetings on Monday nights, and we get two weeks active duty in the summer, summer camp they called it. Then you would like get called out for floods or tornados or big fires and stuff like that. I just thought that way I could stay at home and still serve the country and put in my time, but then it ended up they decided I had to go somewhere else to do that.

TW: Around what season – was it the spring of '69, summer of '69 – when were you called up to Vietnam?

DK: Well, it was in the spring of '68 because we had just gotten the crop put in. I was living in Sioux City at that time because my wife was finishing her nurses' training at St. Joe's Hospital there so rather than have her drive to school every day we just moved to Sioux City and I would drive back here to help on the farm. Then we got activated it was just before my wife's graduation from nurses' training, and I then was in Fort Carson but then two of us did come home for the weekend. Two of us guys who both had wives in nurses' training come home for the graduation but then we had to leave again. But then it wasn't too much longer after that they came down there and we moved into an apartment in Colorado Springs, which was right next to Fort Carson in Colorado there. We lived in the apartment in Colorado Springs for, oh I suppose that was, about six or seven months, and then I got my

orders to go to Vietnam in December of '68. We got to come home on leave just over Christmas and New Year's.

Then in January I left to go Vietnam. I flew out of Omaha then and my wife was pregnant and expecting our first child, and I left in January and Carrie, our oldest daughter, was born in April. I didn't get home until Thanksgiving in November so that was the first time I saw my oldest daughter was when she was that age. She didn't like me too much. I was a total stranger to her; of course, seeing me in an army uniform was tough. It was just all green and she didn't think too much of her dad at that time but it didn't take too long, and she would sit on my lap and let me hold her and stuff like that. I thought I was going to freeze to death when I came home. They thought it was nice weather here, it was 35 to 40 degrees, end of November, but I was used to 110 in the shade so I thought I was going to freeze to death. I was walking around with a coat on all the time.

TW: When you were called up, the Vietnam conflict had been going on for some time and there was a lot of controversy in this country. Despite that, what did you know of Vietnam, what were you expecting?

DK: Well, all you saw on TV were the rice paddies and the jungle, and that's what I was expecting when we got there. I was, I would say, very pleasantly surprised when we got there that we were actually going to be living in the city. It was a old hotel. We didn't have any windows; they had all been blown out by hand grenades or whatever. Of course you didn't need windows, just during the rainy season, but then there were all big buildings around us so never any air moving; rain always came straight down so it didn't come in your windows or anything.

I was just very happy to be in what was a fairly modern motor pool. We had roofs to work under; of course, none of the buildings were enclosed. It was just, you had a flat steel roof so you could get the trucks in the shade, to work on them. We would drive jeeps and pickups from our hotel back out to the motor pool which was out on the edge of town. We were real close to Tan Son¹ air base out there where the motor pool was. Like I was saying, there were between 500 and 600 trucks in our motor pool and there was hardly anything that would run. I think there were a couple of gas tankers that were used. They would go out into the jungle and out into the fields and they would stand in a certain place and vehicles would come up to them to get fueled up and then at night those trucks would come back to town, into Saigon again for the night, and of course to get reloaded with fuel. Then we had to start and we were told that we were not going to do the work; we had to teach the Vietnamese people how to do the work.

I had people in my crew from probably a eighteen- or nineteen-year-old young man to, I think, I had lady who was in her early 60s and they all did the same work. They were all expected to do the mechanic's work – put in wheel seals, tune up engines,

¹ Tan Son Nhut air base was the headquarters of the South Vietnamese air force. It was located near Saigon, which is now Ho Chi Minh City (Goldlust).

fix flat tires, and you name it. Some of them were excellent at it, they were quick learners, and there were some you could say, "Okay, today you're going to do this," and you could walk away and you knew when you came back it would be done. Some you could stand, look over their shoulder, day after day after day after day, had to keep telling them every move to make and just like the next day was their first day again because they just wouldn't get it. You figured out what to use people like that for and figured out which ones were good and which ones you could depend on to get the work done.

They were so small, that was always what just amazed me. I think I have pictures of a lady working under the hood on the engine of a truck. She's sitting on the fender well and I can close the hood while she's working on the motor under there. That's just how small she is. For those people to weigh 100 pounds they have to be very big people, have to be very heavy, they stay short. Some of them put on a little weight but they never get very tall. They thought we were giants, they thought we were huge. Of course it helped that this guard unit all came from Northwest Iowa where all the Dutchmen are over 200 pounds and over six feet tall and so they thought we were huge people.

They could understand some of the English. Some of them wouldn't get much, but then each of us had a translator who could tell us what we had just told them to do. They were well-educated people; most of our translators were college-educated people and they had learned the English language on their own, not because of this job but they had learned that as one of the classes that they took in while they were in college. I don't think they ever intended to someday use it in the way they were using it, that we would be there at war with Vietnam and that they would use their English for that reason.

There were some that were very good mechanics, and I would have gladly taken them along home and started a garage here with them. I think I could have made some good money with them.

TW: As far when you were working with the South Vietnamese there was a language barrier but you did have a translator. As far as the general atmosphere, did you feel like there was tension, or what was the general atmosphere, and how did that evolve over time.

DK: Of course, first when we got there, you're scared to death; you're in a war zone and you know it. I mean you can hear the fighting going on all the time. There were helicopters and jets flying right over top of our motor pool all the time. Of course we were right close to the Tan Son air base there. We had guard towers in our motor pool and our entire motor pool was surrounded by fence and barbed wire on the top. Even as you rode down the streets, the Vietnamese people, they didn't seem tense, they didn't seem under pressure. Like I said, they had been at war for 75 years. They didn't know what it was to not to be at war. It didn't faze them a bit. They just went about life like this was a normal situation and they tried to do what

they could do, keep their little shops going and their businesses. They had their own gravel trucks and cabs and taxis and stuff like that. These people were working all the time and they just kind of paid no attention to us as we would go up and down the streets with our army trucks. Of course we had to run out to the ports quite often to get parts. They would come in by ship for our motor pool, and we would have to get a lot of stuff in. We would get semi loads of parts in every day, tires and new motors and stuff like that. It was amazing how many parts we go through in that motor pool. Of course, we had probably 75 Vietnamese people working as mechanics so it took a lot of parts to keep all these people busy. We had good equipment and we had the tools and we had torches and welders. I mean, the military always seemed to have the equipment on hand that you needed. It was just to get the work done which was the hard part. Of course, it could stay over 100 degrees, 115-120 everyday, 105 at night, you know, it just didn't seem to change much. They were used to it, it didn't seem to bother them any to work in that kind of weather.

The Vietnamese men themselves would get drafted twice. The first time they would get drafted it would be for two years, then after serving two years they would be sent home for a year and then they would get drafted for three years. They had to have an ID card which showed the status which they were at. So if they were home in civilian clothes, riding a moped down the street, there were Vietnamese police on every corner, or not every corner but a lot of corners, and we always called them white mice because they were so small and completely dressed in white: White uniform, white boots, white ammo belts, white helmets, everything, white gloves, and they would blow the whistle. When they blew that whistle, everybody within range of being able to hear that would look at them and they would point at somebody going by on a motor scooter that they wanted to stop. If that person didn't stop, they would shoot him and leave him lay. They blow the whistle again, go for the next one. They wouldn't go over and try and help this person or try to find out if he was supposed to be home or not. If you didn't stop, you got shot. They went on about their business, and nobody else on the street paid any attention to them.

There was not much respect for human life. That was just something they got used to, it was just expected that that was going to happen. Saigon was a beautiful city but we would ride down the street or walk down the street and you would see concertina wire grown a foot in a tree. That was how long that concertina wire had been laying along that street, that the tree had grown a foot in diameter since that concertina wire got laid there and it was still laying there. You knew this had been going on for a long time, not just since you've got there.

TW: So as far as the South Vietnamese civilians, South Vietnamese police, South Vietnamese military within Saigon, was there tension there? Were there a lot of

South Vietnamese that joined the Vietcong², were they frustrated with the government? How did you perceive that?

DK: I think at least the ones I know, the ones that I worked with especially, were glad that we were there. They were very nice to us and polite to us. We were invited to a wedding of the daughter of one of the gentlemen that worked for us. I know when we got ready to come home, we had an old gentleman that worked in our parts room, couldn't speak a word of English, all you have to do is show him the old part and he'd look at it and he'd go back in the parts room and he come with the new one. You never had to say anything to the guy; he just knew what his job was and he knew what you wanted. When we were going to come home, he just cried like a baby, tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn't want us to leave. We told him there would be other ones coming to replace us and stuff like that.

I actually felt like we were doing a good service there. We were teaching a lot of people a trade who would never have known how to do any of this work before. I figured when the war was over some of these people can do this kind of work, start a garage because streets were jammed with motorcycles and cars and pickups and trucks. So I mean there was a demand there for mechanics, I am sure. So we thought these people are going to be able to do this, you know, when we leave. We made good friends with the ones we worked with. I think we were doing a good thing by being there, and the people that we were working with, they wanted us there. And I can't speak for the entire population but I don't think there were very many South Vietnamese that wanted to go and join the North Vietnamese. They wanted to stay separate from them and stay with their own government. They liked that a lot better, but of course it didn't end up that way.

TW: How or maybe not how...but did your perception, while you were over there, of the war, did your perception of it change or was there a specific time when you got home from Vietnam that your perception of the war changed? Maybe you took in more of a negative spin or you started questioning why United States military forces were over there?

DK: Well, I don't think I ever decided that we shouldn't be there. I was disappointed when we pulled out. Then it seemed like there were thousands of lives wasted and years wasted and of course millions and billions of dollars wasted. I think if they would have untied the hands of the military, would have allowed them to do some attacking and go on the offensive instead of being on the defensive all the time, I think we could have ended the war much sooner and we could have won the war. I felt disappointed and unhappy when, of course, they decided to turn tail and get out of there the way they did. Then I felt like it was all wasted.

While I was there, I felt like there were good things going on and the morale was

² The term Vietcong was used to refer to members of a group officially known as the National Liberation Front. This group of South Vietnamese wanted to reunify the country under communist rule.

high among the GIs. I mean, they said one reason the morale was high because everybody knew when you went there you were going to serve a year and then you were going to be out. It was different than First World War, Second World War where you just got into the war zone and you stayed until the war was over. So that part was much easier on us than the veterans that were home.

It seemed when we were there things were going well. We were accepted on the streets; I mean, the South Vietnamese were always friendly to us no matter where we went. After we were there a few months and every once in a while we would get a day off, we'd travel around the city on our day off and do some sightseeing. Saigon was a very beautiful city, a lot of things to see, and wherever we would go the people would be courteous to you and treat you with what I thought was respect. I actually thought we were doing a good thing when we were there.

TW: Some of your peers who served in the armed forces in the Vietnam conflict, they differ with you on that they take an opposite spin. Looking back on it, they don't think we should have been there, to put thousands or hundreds of thousands of troops that were there under the Johnson Administration, the massive bombing – they perceive that it didn't work. What would you say to that? There was a lot of bombardment over there, there were hundreds of thousands of troops. What you say... there was difference of opinion obviously amongst Vietnam veterans.

DK: Yes, I'm sure there were. It would make a huge difference what you doing when you were there. That's where I think I have quite a unique perspective on the whole thing because I was working in direct contact with South Vietnamese people every day. I mean it was like going to work like I do now. I see these people every day and you got to know these people, and they would talk about their families and their backgrounds and members of the family that they had lost and how they had to struggle to feed families or to feed their children. They were of course hoping for better times and they thought, you know, that the United States was going to help them to get to this.

I can understand if I was out in the jungle all day doing nothing but shooting and getting shot at. You know, you're going to have a totally different perspective than someone who's visiting with a young man or young woman who's working and trying to feed their family and they can tell you how bad things were 10 years ago and 15 years ago and how things have improved. I think their living standard had improved already since we got there. There was much less violence. I mean the Tet Offensive³ the year before, that was bad in Saigon. Since then, things in Saigon were pretty well controlled, very seldom that you heard of anyone being killed right there in the city. So I'm sure that my perspective would have been different too had I been out in the jungle in hand-to-hand combat every day. That's going to make you look at things different.

³ In January of 1968, the North Vietnamese launched an attack on South Vietnam during an agreed cease-fire for the Tet holiday. The surprise attack is often considered a turning point in the Vietnam War; Americans began to lose their support for and belief in the war. (Land)

TW: You said before the interview that there were times that you were not given the right to shoot back if bullets were coming your way. Were there times where you had dodged bullets, to use the terms a bit loosely, and what was the reaction as a group? You didn't really have self-defense in a way when events like that happened.

DK: No, we were sent out into the country once in awhile with wreckers or flatbeds to pick up tankers or water trailers or stuff like this from our motor pool that had run over a land mine or been hit by a mortar or something like that. We would come under fire once in awhile while we were out there, but we would just have to make a run for it because for one thing we weren't issued the best kind of equipment for that kind of fighting because weren't expected to do it. For another thing we weren't supposed to do it. We were supposed to get out there and get our piece of equipment and get back. I came back with a flatbed one time with bullet holes in the cab. I was never touched but that's just the grace of God, I guess, that I wasn't. Then one night we always had our turns to be on guard at the motor pool. At night we would have to sleep there. They had bunks in the one office that we could sleep on, and they had – it was like the Vietnamese national guard who were in the guard towers.

They were there 24 hours a day, seven days a week around the perimeter of the motor pool. One of them came running into the office one night and said that they saw some men coming out of a house right outside the motor pool with guns. Around the outside of the motor pool there were floodlights shining down on the ground all the way around the outside so you could see if there was anything going on out there. So the two of us that were on guard duty that night, we had a conex⁴ container there with automatic rifles in it and a couple of machine guns and some hand grenades. We went out there, got one of the machine guns out of there, and we set it on the roof of one of the crew cab pick-ups that we had. About the time we got out there they started shooting at the motor camp towards the inside of the motor pool. At the base of each one of these guard towers there were sand bags stacked up about five feet high, and with just one opening that you could get inside that. We went in there and we decided we had to get to our conex container and get some stuff out. So we went and got the machine gun out and set it on the roof of the pick-up, and we run the ammunition belt back in the back window and set two boxes of ammunition in the backseat. And he just started driving towards the people that were shooting, and I started firing that machine gun off the roof of the pickup, and we went until we were right beside the pickup.

Before we left the office, there's a radio that we called Tan Son⁵ air base. We were always supposed to do that if we saw anything – call them first. So we had done that before we had gone outside, and then they sent helicopters over. These

⁴ Conex boxes were used to transport equipment and supplies to Vietnam (“History and Development of the Conex”).

helicopters, just with their ammunition and their rockets and stuff, they just leveled these houses outside the motor pool there. Then of course everything got quiet and we turned around, went back, put our stuff away again and that was it. That was one time we decided we're going to shoot back so we did. [Laughs.]

TW: You mentioned, in reference to your faith a couple of minutes ago, about God's grace. Looking through the eyes of your faith, how did it affect how you served in Vietnam? How did it affect how you looked at your service, just in all areas and your peers, the faith they had, how did it influence them?

DK: Like I say, the first while we were there we had to work 24/7. There was no time off for anything. After we started getting some days off, then we would never miss chapel; in fact, the chapel was in the same building where we lived. It was at the other end of the building. We had to go up a few floors but there was a chapel out there along the front street. We would help the chaplain with some work or stuff in the chapel. Believe me, you did a lot of praying while you were over there, and I wore out a little Bible while I was over there. I don't know how you would get through a year like that without believing in God, and without your Bible, and without going to chapel. It lifted a tremendous load off your shoulders.

Many times we had people from our unit that were killed and we would hear about it. Sometimes they would be killed five miles from us there in Vietnam, and we would find out from the letter we got from home because you wouldn't hear about it in Vietnam. There was no way for those people out there to know who you knew and so we would find out that one of our friends was killed over there, and by the time we found out, the body had already been sent home.

We furnished the trucks to haul the bodies from out in the field to the morgues. In Vietnam, we had five morgues spread out in Vietnam. Then after the bodies were prepared, we had trucks that hauled them from the morgues to the airports to fly them home, so we knew that a lot of this was going on and how many were dying. It was great to be able to sit down and talk with the chaplain once in a while. And I didn't envy these chaplains. It had to be a tough job over there in a war zone. It's one thing, I think, being a minister here. It's bad enough now, like when our church lost a young man in Iraq just a few months ago, for the minister to have to go through that with a family when a young man like that is killed that far from home. But those chaplains were in those wars zones all the time. They had people coming to them every day. Some people just couldn't take it; they needed a lot of help. I think it would have been a lot tougher for me if I wouldn't have believed in God and wouldn't have had a Bible and wouldn't have had a chapel to go to. I think it also helped because of all the people that I was with were originally from this area, most of them were from church homes and attended church when they were here and attended church again when they came back. So it made a lot of difference on how the year went for me over there.

TW: As far as back on the domestic front, you mentioned before the interview that your wife was pregnant when you left for Vietnam and so you were expecting a child back home. That was a very tense time in your life for that. So how did she take it, how did your parents take it? Was there some tension between you and your parents over Vietnam? Or how did that go about on the domestic front?

DK: Well, they-when I went to Vietnam, my wife moved back home again and she-we had this home already before we went to Sioux City for her to finish her nurses' training. So we kept this home, it just stood empty for quite some time, but then when she came home she just moved right back in with her parents. That was just a couple of miles further north than where I was born and raised and then a little bit east on a gravel road there, that's where her parents farmed. They still have that farm out there. Then they of course got her to the hospital when the baby was due. It was born in a very bad winter that year. I had an uncle who was my mother-in-law's brother who drove the maintainer for the county in that area, and the roads were just shut at night. That was the first road he went down in the morning with his grader to make sure that that road was open because he knew that baby was due any day and he wanted to make sure that she could get to town when she had to go. So that was always taken care of, and I knew that she was in good hands with her folks. She was the oldest of the family so she had a younger sister and a brother home yet.

Of course, it was very tense for them because they knew that their youngest daughter was going to marry a young man when he came home from Vietnam and he was killed there the year before, a young fellow from Sioux Center. So the next year I go, so they have another daughter who has a man over in Vietnam. So they didn't miss watching the news every night. Then my wife's grandfather in Orange City lost a son in the Second World War. He was killed in France.

After I dated my wife a while, we found out that he was killed the day I was born. I was born September 1, 1944; he was killed in Vietnam⁶ September 1, 1944. So then he would make sure he was in front of the TV every night watching the news about Vietnam, and that was my dad-in-law's dad, then it was my dad-in-law's brother was the one killed in Vietnam⁷. Then it was like when I made it home then, he thought well now I can die. He was very old, very poor health, but they, my dad-in-law and his sister, they said they thought my being in Vietnam kept him alive.

He wanted to make sure that he lived to see me come home because he had lost a son in Vietnam he wasn't going to lose a – or he had lost a son in Second World War, he didn't want to lose a grandson in Vietnam – so he just fought to stay alive until he saw that I got home. About two and a half weeks after I got home he died, and I still think about that when we get to the Orange City cemetery for a funeral. We also go look at them on Memorial Day too, look at all the graves of our relatives, and I see that date on his stone every time we go by there, and I think

⁶ Mr. Kluis likely meant France here.

⁷ Mr. Kluis meant France here as well.

yeah that probably would have been earlier if I would have been home, but he just hung on until he was sure I was home and then he thought, well, now I can go. You know that's the way it seemed.

TW: How did your parents take it, as they were anticipating you coming home, and how did they take the waiting period? What was their perception of the conflict?

DK: Well, they never said much about the war, I think mainly because I was in the military. They didn't want to start any hard feelings or anything. I'm sure they didn't like the fact that the war was going on. They didn't want to see me go away; I was the only one of the family in the military so it was a totally new experience for them. They knew that their two son-in-laws had been in the service. I don't think they talked to me twice about it after I got home about what went on over there or how I felt about it or anything like that. I think they just wanted to forget it, it's over, let's forget it, let it be by gone. They didn't want to bring it up again.

TW: You mentioned when you came home there was a lot of tension between the U.S. populace and the veterans, there was a lot of hatred if I can use that word. The veterans were not popular. What were some of the things that brought that about? I know the My Lai Massacre⁸ had happened. I know this was the year that they, I believe '69 if I am correct, was the day that they had those investigations where [inaudible] was brought to the forefront. Was it a combination of Tet Offensive, My Lai? What was with the animosity and how did you react to that or your peers react to that?

DK: Well, I think they just... a lot of people had the idea that we had no business being there. They didn't think North Vietnam was a threat to our country, but our government felt that it was just trying to stop the spread of communism. Of course we knew Russia was backing them and China was backing them. We could tell talking to guys who were – we had R&Rs⁹ where we go out of country for a week and then there were in-country R&Rs, that's when some of the troops from out in the jungle would come and stay in Saigon for a week – and then they would say that they could tell that some of the enemy they were fighting were Chinese because they were bigger. And they said, well that's good because we got a bigger target when they're fighting with them. They just felt it was a matter of democracy fighting communism rather than South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese. It was just a place to do it where now Iraq is the place to do it.

I think, right in this area, when I came home, I was very lucky to be in a small town like this, small population. I think the people didn't bring it up because of what they knew was the feeling in the country. We had a lot of people going to going to Canada so they wouldn't get drafted and wouldn't have to go to the military, and

⁸ The My Lai Massacre occurred in March 1968, and was brought to Americans' attention in early 1969. During the event, soldiers in one company killed between 175-400 unarmed Vietnamese men, women and children, committed rapes and destroyed property (Cosmas).

⁹ Military acronym for rest and recuperation or rest and recreation.

people putting on demonstrations in Washington, D.C., and on college campuses. I was lucky to be in a small community like this where people said hey let's just forget it. I think, if it would have been a popular war like Iraq, when you got home people would have come to you and talked about it.

The only one who ever mentioned it to me was a fellow who was retired and he lived down the street here. He was my superintendent in the school here in Maurice before I went to Orange City, and his only comment was I felt sorry for you guys, he says, over there fighting a war today, he says, with World War II equipment because they wouldn't let us bring the best, and our best equipment and stuff like that to fight in a war, you know, which we could have ended overnight. I mean they ended the Second World War with a bomb. All they had to do was threaten to use that over here and I think it would have been over, but they just didn't.

It was like they didn't want to end it. I know I felt that way many times in our motor pool because just about all of our parts came from Philco-Ford Corporation¹⁰ which was in Texas which was owned by Lady Bird Johnson¹¹. We thought she's making a million dollars a day while this war is going on, she doesn't want it to end.

TW: Around '69 or '70...you came back home in '70?

DK: Well, actual Thanksgiving Day '69, the end of November.

TW: So it was late '69. Around that time we were at the climax, if I'm not mistaken, of anti-war protest. This was the climax, the apex of anti-war demonstrations. How did you deal with that coming home? You were somebody who thought you had served, who had done your duty in good faith toward God, and you had done something that was for the betterment of humanity. You had gone home and the country, as a whole, it seemed like there was no respect. How did you, how did the veterans deal with that back home? How did they react to that? On a larger question, what was your general feeling of the direction in which the country was going?

DK: Well, there again I was very fortunate to be in an area where I was in this part of the state. I mean the closest, what you would call a good-sized city, was Sioux City; I don't remember any demonstrations in Sioux City. The closest like I could say I could remember, is like at Iowa City, University of Iowa. There were probably some at Ames, at Iowa State. Some of these bigger schools were having demonstrations. In this part of the country, I mean, I would have to see it on the

¹⁰ Ford Corporation and Philco Corporation merged in 1966 to become Philco-Ford Corporation. During the Vietnam War, the company manufactured parts for weapons and equipment (Altgelt).

¹¹ Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Taylor Johnson was the First Lady of the United States when her husband, Lyndon B. Johnson, was president from 1963 to 1969. At the time her family owned Philco-Ford Corporation, and rumors spread that her family was making a profit on the Vietnam War ("Lady Bird Johnson").

news on the TV if I was going to see something like that. Just didn't pay much attention to it, I guess. I figured I did what I was supposed to do. It isn't something I volunteered to do; I would probably never volunteer to do it again but I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

I remember one older fellow was telling me, this isn't so terrible many years ago, that he brought it up that he thinks this country is too free, that he thinks there should be – and in a way, I have to agree with him there – I don't think we should have to draft all of the young men in this country for like two or three years, but I do think it would be good for this country to draft everyone for like 90 days, maybe six months, at least train them in some aspect of defense of this country. Right now our country is just strapped for enough people to fulfill all the obligations of our military. I did serve with some career servicemen who had been in the army 27, 28 years. This one told me, he says that he's very proud, he says, to be a member of an armed forces that has never lost a war but he said I'm kind of getting sick of being entered into every fight that comes along. [Laughs]

TW: You mentioned, made a reference to the media as far as the country as a whole, that where you probably on the nightly news when you returned, that's where you saw a lot of the protesters, probably, on the news, on campuses, maybe more of the intellectual crowd if you will. How did that, before you had left for Vietnam and afterwards, how did you view...was the media, where were they at before the war as far as what you saw in the media and where was the media after the war? For instance, since there were many journalists who were sort of hawkish in the early wars, in the early years, I mean, of Vietnam and they sort of switched. How did the media change the perception?

DK: I don't know if they changed so much as what I changed of what I would believe because we would see...we got *Stars and Stripes*¹² magazine in Vietnam. We usually considered that *Stars and Stripes* was going to print the truth and it was much different than what you would hear on the TV at night. We could see TV in our hotel at night in Saigon there and they would talk about the casualties for this day, this week, this month so far and whatever. It did not jive because we knew how many bodies we were hauling with our trucks. So we knew that what was being reported to the people back here was not the truth. They were downscaling it. They would say 10 Americans were killed this week and we know 75 were killed this week because that's how many bodies we hauled to the morgue and that's how many we hauled from the morgue to the airplane to go home. And of course once they get back here the bodies are dispersed over the entire country. So there's no real way to keep track once they get back here.

Before I went to Vietnam, before I was actually there to see firsthand what was going on, I believed everything that I read in the paper and what I saw on television, and you should be able to. It should be the truth, but I got to where after I was there

¹² *Stars and Stripes* is a newspaper distributed overseas for military members. It is independent but authorized by the Department of Defense.

and after I came home I didn't always believe what I was hearing on TV or seeing on TV and what they report was this fight was going on for this long. I just knew some of these areas because I had been out there to retrieve vehicles, and I said there's no way that all this fighting is going on there and they would show pictures on TV, and I said that's not even the place, you know. So you just wondered what going on. I don't think they had near the coverage like they do now with all the reporters in Iraq and with the troops. I think we see just about every move they are making and sometimes I don't think that's a good thing because then the enemy can watch TV, find out what we're up to, too. I don't know, I just...like I say, my acceptance of what I saw on TV really changed from before I went to Vietnam to after I was there.

TW: You said that the United States military had what you believed to be very out-moded equipment, out-dated would be a better word, a lot of it World War II style. You also believed that there was some misleading by the media on the extent of casualties. Did you trust the government? I mean that had to digress a little bit, I mean, what was your view of the government afterwards? What could you trust them on?

DK: I don't think it's the government's fault about the way these things were being reported. I think just some of the media were...I don't know if they were going on heresy or who was telling them this. I don't think there were very many reporters in Vietnam like there are today in Iraq.

I don't seem to ever have much faith in our government; I don't have much respect for politicians. [Laughs.] I don't know. Like this war that's going on now, I don't know, I think that's something that got totally out of hand. Like a lot of people are saying I don't think they had a plan when they went in there and after we have 1,000 men killed and then they try to figure out what were going to do and that should have been figured out before we got there. It's a good thing I'm not in charge; I don't have all the answers either.

I didn't think that our government was doing anything wrong as far as being in Vietnam; I just think they didn't take enough offensive action, they didn't try and end it. They were satisfied to just let it go on and on and on and then finally got out. It just seemed it was all turned to make it look like the troops were doing something wrong. The troops were the ones being blamed for it. Well there weren't too many of the troops in Vietnam who were there because they wanted to be; it was just serving your time in the military and that's where you get sent so that's what you do. They're the ones who had to take the guff when they got home, you know.

TW: After Johnson left office, after he didn't run for a second term, Nixon was in office and he promised that there would be peace, that was one of his stands, one of his platforms, if you will. He eventually started withdrawing troops. He's the one who...Johnson was the climax where we had five hundred thousand something troops, and Nixon just eventually started phasing out troops, five thousand here – I'm using

rough numbers – but twenty-five thousand here. When they started phasing out troops, what was the reaction as far as people who were still in Vietnam that you knew or just the reaction around here in northwest Iowa which is substantially more conservative than the rest of the country. How did that go?

DK: Well, I think when they started to take troops out, I don't think anybody realized that it was going to be as fast as it was and that it would end up with the last ones just kind of making a run for it, people jumping off the roof of the embassy to grab a hold of a helicopter as it's going by. You know, I'll never forget seeing those pictures. Like I said, our government had never lost a war anywhere before, and I don't think we lost this war, they just quit, they just pulled out. That's where I think it became more political than military. It was like this, when you change administrations in the middle of a war and then, like you say, their platform is we'll get the troops out of there. I think, well, okay, do we want to get the troops out of there but let's win this thing before we get the troops out of there. Otherwise, you know, we shouldn't have went there in the first place. If you don't go there with the intention of winning it, why then you got no business being there. I think it was, you know, I don't think that we were running because we were scared, or running because we were overpowered or overdone or whatever. It was just, like you say, part of his campaign that he was going to get the troops out of there and he did it. At least he did what he said he was going to do. The timing and everything seemed wrong. It made him popular because so many of the people in this country didn't want the war to be going on in the first place so they thought it was great that we were getting out of there, no matter whether we were done or not.

TW: As far as your first-hand eyewitness of the Vietnam conflict, as far as you were involved in... Like people my age who are college-age who are studying history, people just in general who weren't there, there's a lot of thing they know that are right about Vietnam but there are a lot of misconceptions they have. There's also a lot of general consensus for people who weren't there that basically the government screwed up, we never should have been there. As far as misconceptions, what are some of the common misconceptions that people have from your point of view as far as the Vietnam War?

DK: Like I saying earlier, I don't think anybody who wasn't there could see what some of these people felt, the South Vietnamese, how they felt about us being there. They were glad that we were there. They thought we were gaining ground. They thought they had a better level of existence there at that time. They were living in fear; they were afraid to go out on the streets. While I was there, the streets were busy, people were going about normal daily activities. Some of things they hadn't done in years; they were under siege for so long. They said some of these people, well one fellow who worked in our motor pool, there was a 70 year-old guy, he said didn't go to sleep a night for 25 years without hearing automatic gun fire going off and rockets incoming and mortars incoming and things like this.

All you hear are the bad things, well okay, this person set off a hand grenade and

killed a civilian or killed a child or whatever. Well, this is a war and things like that happen in a war. That's the kind of things they report; they don't report the 75 Vietcong that were killed without ever hurting a civilian. But then again the North Vietnamese, they used things for protection like the hospitals, the schools, the churches. That's where they would make their bases so you didn't dare fire mortars in there or power grenades or things like this because you knew you were going to kill innocent people. But if they're in those places and they're firing at you and you're going to fire back, somebody that's innocent is going to get killed, but all you hear about is the innocent one that got killed. You don't hear about the 25 Vietcong that were in that church shooting at you or in that hospital shooting at you. That doesn't get reported, you know, that's, "Oh you guys were firing at a hospital or you're firing at a school or at a church." I just don't think those kinds of things should even be reported; it's part of war.

Sometimes I get upset about these things that are on TV about these wars; I figure you guys don't know what you're talking about, you're not in there getting shot at and stuff like this and that's where it gets to be more political. Of course the upper echelon officers, they don't like this kind of news being reported but they know there's nothing they're going to do about it, there's nothing you can do; it's just a part of war. So I think you know you're always going to have a difference of feeling between the military people and the civilian people both at home and in the war zone.

TW: If I can interject as far as politically...like we have certain political people on the current war in Iraq on both spectrums. As far as just not politicians, but what I am saying actors, people from Hollywood, some supporting war, some against it; Vietnam was the same. I know we had some people for and some people against. Somebody who was very, I don't know if I would say infamous, she definitely wasn't very popular for a lot of people in your generation, was Jane Fonda¹³. What, was she popular at the time in this country because there was an increasing amount of people turning against the war, or was she considered as unpatriotic and people that would like Jane Fonda who were celebrities, people of profound, maybe not, I'm trying to think of the word, people who were on that pedestal who were known throughout America who were anti-war. How were these people taken in this country?

DK: I don't know about back here, because when I got back to the United States I was discharged out of the service so I wasn't in the military anymore, but I know in Vietnam it made their papers. They made a big deal about Jane Fonda. The Vietnamese would show me and the only words I was able to read on the whole front page of the paper was the name "Jane Fonda" but it was in the article. They would have a picture of her and then they would tell me what it said, you know, that, "Do you like her? You know, she says you're no good." Them Vietnamese, it

¹³ An American actor, Jane Fonda was vocal about her opposition to the Vietnam War. While she spoke out against the war in America throughout the late 1960s, she did not visit Vietnam until 1972. She traveled to Hanoi and broadcasted anti-war statements over Radio Hanoi (Welsh).

was always you're number one or number ten, and she said, "You number ten," stuff like this. I wouldn't want to get into it with them so I would just shake my head and walk away. But we did not think too much of Jane Fonda, I still don't think too much of Jane Fonda to this day because of what she was doing. I don't think it carries much weight. Most of us just figure, like you say, a politician, that's one thing, they're probably going to be able to cause something to happen, but somebody like her, I think she was doing it to get her name in the paper and get some attention and stuff like this. And it worked for her. I suppose you got that with every war. There's going to be somebody like that that's going to speak up and they're going to try to get on the train and get a free ride out of the deal. It didn't make much difference to me. I just kind of let it be like water on a duck's back, just let it run off. I thought she's not going to do me any harm so I didn't pay much attention to it. They definitely heard all the way around the world; it was in the Vietnamese papers.

TW: As far as celebrities as a whole, maybe religious leaders, I know Martin Luther King ended up going out against the war. Celebrities, religious leaders, people in social standings that are respected when they spoke out for the war, against the war, what type of influence or impact do you think it had on the American populace? Was it minimal, was it substantial, was it just a reinforcing effect for people who had already decided on what they thought of the war?

DK: Oh, I think it probably did. The people who, like the demonstrators, stuff like this, it made them feel good. They had somebody to point at, "See, see, he's important, he's famous, he's rich" or whatever but that doesn't carry much weight when you're sent there by the military to do a job. You don't have a choice. You're just doing your job, you're doing what you're told to do. If I was, just say, a mercenary, over there on my own, fighting my own private battle and I would see something like this, then I would sit down and well, gee now, are they right or am I right? But that really can't have any effect on your thinking while you're over there or you're going to get yourself in trouble. You got to keep your mind on what's at hand and what you're there to do, otherwise you're not going to get it done.

TW: As far as the populace as a whole, were there...nowadays the Iraqi war, people say you are either for it or against it and if you're neutral you're one of the two people in this country who are neutral on something. As far as Vietnam, was it the same? Was it basically the same principle – you were either for it or against it, and if you're neutral was that few and far in between? Or how did that go?

DK: I don't think there were very many people that were neutral. I think everybody usually takes a side. I think in the civilian population, I would say by far the majority were against it, at least of course, the quiet ones are never heard. They always say the worst thing you could ever do in some of these kinds of things is to do nothing. The ones that were against it, of course, they're making a sound, they're making a noise, they're being heard, they're getting in the papers, they're getting on television but the ones who are not against it and who are even in favor of it well,

they figure we're there, we're doing what we can do. They're not going to...especially if you have a relative that was in the military that was over there, you're not going to come out and say something against it. You don't want to make waves. You just say well, I'm just going to go with this until my relatives get home and then we're going to put it behind us and we're going to forget it. I think it's very difficult for someone to say well I don't care one way or the other with something like this going on, especially in this day and age where everything is in the papers and on TV and every move they make. You would have to be living under a rock somewhere, I think, if you weren't going to have an opinion one way or the other.

TW: As far as Vietnam veterans and their stories and with some concluding thoughts...As you've said, you believe there are many misconceptions people have about Vietnam and the role that veterans played. Just misconceptions in general as far as stories being heard to be about the veterans, those who were for the war felt that they were doing a service to their country and had a faith to their god, and those who were against it who were fighting the Vietcong who would be on the opposite spectrum of views far as opinion. Do you feel like, in general, that the Vietnam veterans today in 2007, that for the most part their stories are being heard or do we have a long ways to go? What's your take on that?

DK: I think a lot of the Vietnam story has come out in the last four or five years. You're starting to see, I don't know what you want to call it, like conventions and reunions. They're starting to put up Vietnam memorials and things like this because they realize that, well these guys were just doing their job, doing what they were supposed to do, what their country told them to do. It was all swept under the carpet back then and was just hush hush, let's get it out of the way and put it out of sight, out of mind. I think now, with what's going on...I'm on a committee here to build a war memorial here in Maurice, and my name is on the one in Orange City. Talking with this gentleman now who sells all these stones and stuff and helps you design these memorials, I asked him, I said, "What is this, a fad that comes around about every so often?" I said, "All of a sudden all of these towns are putting up these war memorials."

He said it's about a 20 year cycle where it will be really busy for three, four years, and then 15 to 20 years you don't hear much about it, then it will come up again. But I think it's just after about so long, these people are my age, they're retirement age, a lot of them are dying. There are a lot of Vietnam veterans who are, you know, in their upper 70s, especially if they were career servicemen. They're probably dead and gone already; I know many of the fellows I was in Vietnam with were career men so they already had 20 to 25 years in the service, so they're, I'm sure, dead and gone in unless they're well over a 100 years old. It's just that they're starting to think that these guys did what they were supposed to do and then when you get to a place now like Iraq after the 9/11, then it becomes popular to go after somebody because of what they did on our soil, and then when you've got a popular struggle going on somewhere, then it makes all GIs look good, because oh if you

were a veteran than it was good, well, oh gosh, then we got to include the Vietnam veterans, you know. I think that's what's bringing it to light now. If Iraq hadn't happened or 9/11 hadn't happened, I don't know if Vietnam veterans would be coming out of the woodwork like they are or not. Like here we are, 2007, and this is the first time I've been interviewed about being a Vietnam veteran. Why is that? That's 45 years ago that that happened, 40 years ago you know. Why didn't somebody from the history class come to talk to me before 2007? Why are you doing this now? I should ask you a question.

TW: I wouldn't be doing this interview if our professor hadn't required us to do it because it never hit me to actually interview someone. That never came to my mind. Obviously there's something – I guess reporters aren't supposed to give their opinion. Well, maybe people, you know, all around this country, there's something the matter when many people who want to convey their experiences from wars have not been interviewed and a lot of people, it sort of comes into the spotlight after 9/11, for instance, and it goes away. Basically, what is this country missing as far as the next steps it needs to take to show the veterans that we acknowledge that you served and you were serving your country in Vietnam and we want to get more of the story out, we want the whole story. What needs to happen next in this country?

DK: Well, I don't even know where you would start. I think if you look at what this country's been through, how it started, people come here for religious freedom and stuff like that, and the way they struggled to get by for the first 15 to 75 years this country was in existence. I don't know if you've ever been out East to see what George Washington and those troops went through, where our entire Continental army was down to less than 75 people. England could have come over here and took over this country. It would have taken about 20 minutes, and they fought their way back, they hung in there. Most of the people that died then was from disease, hunger, and the cold rather than the military, the fighting. When you look at how they fought to get through there, do we remember those people, do we remember Washington because he was the president of the country? We remember, I mean out East, they do take extremely long measures to preserve this kind of history out there. I've got to give them credit for that, which we don't do much of in the rest of the country. But here, you know, that's just one example that started this country and it's still not brought that much to light. Of course, it's more in history and stuff than what some of the other wars are.

I think there's, you know, the young people of the day and, I think you're included, don't realize how much freedom you have because of the fact that there are veterans, because of the wars they've gone to. Like today you can get in a car and drive to Maurice. You don't have to sneak down an alley to come and talk to me about this, and you can go to a church without sneaking through an alley in the dark, keeping the lights off in the church. You're free to go to any church you want, you're free to go to any school you want. You can cross state lines, you can cross county lines and, you know, it's just freedoms that we take for granted that none of them would be there if it wasn't for the military. I mean, you can have all the

presidents, all the congressmen, all the senators you want, they can make all these laws, but how are you going to keep those laws in place, and who's going to protect you from the rest of the world who doesn't want us to have those laws? Without the military, this country would have been gone a long time ago. If nothing else, Russia would have taken over, Cuba would have taken over if the military wouldn't have stopped them. I mean, it can happen any time from any direction from anywhere. There are too many people in this world who are power hungry. I think about it when we get on a plane and fly across the country to visit one of our kids and stuff like this that, you know, other countries you wouldn't be able to do this. You would have to get permission, you'd be going through roadblocks, you'd be getting your car searched, and things like this. Here, it's you can do it as you want.

You're a history man; you can probably tell me who said this, you know: "I totally disagree with what you're saying but I'll die fighting to give you the chance to say that because you're in a free country."

TW: I can't remember, the Revolutionary War...

DK: Yeah. [Laughs.]

TW: I can't think of the person.

DK: I mean, you know, we're not a military state by any means. But I think the freedoms we have, it's 90% controlled by the military; it's gotten us where we are today. The Revolutionary War, the War between the States, the First World War, Second World War, Korea, I mean it just goes on and on and on. If that's what it takes to keep us free, then I'm all for it and if you can come up with a better idea, then you'd be president in no time. [Laughs.]

TW: As you said I'm a member of a college class where for a lot of us, it's not as fresh in our mind in general basis what this country stands for and this country's history. This is being recorded and I'm sure many of my peers in my class are going to hear it and anybody probably at Northwestern who are students if they desire to hear it. If you had, I mean, take as long as you want if you would, but as far as the younger generation, especially college students who would be listening to this, what would you like to say to them? You're a veteran amongst millions of veterans from the Vietnam era. There's many people at Northwestern that are history majors. If you could say anything to them, what would you say to them from your point of view?

DK: Well, I would say, you know, there's a couple of different ways to say this. Don't blame the veterans for what you think was the loss of lives that were unnecessary because these veterans are doing what they're instructed to do. They're not individuals out there, it's an army, and they're following orders. If you enjoy the freedoms that you have today, if you enjoy the country you're in, being able to travel, being able to go to school, being able to find the job that you want, and being able to make a living at it, and being able to raise a family in this country where you

don't have to worry about somebody coming and knocking your door down in the middle of the night because you believe in something a little different than somebody down the street, and if you enjoy that kind of thing, well, just thank a veteran because that's probably how you got the freedom that you have today.

TW: Are there any concluding comments, thoughts, something to leave the audience with, or the listeners rather?

DK: Well, I do appreciate this chance to say what I felt those many, many years ago. I'm sure there are some things now that I've probably forgotten about Vietnam that at that time I didn't think I'd ever forget. Like I say, the one thing that I've always said, I probably would never volunteer to go do it again, but I wouldn't trade the experience for anything. I think this country would be stronger and a better place to live if everybody got a chance in some way, shape or form to take a part in saying, "Well, I helped preserve the freedom of this country." Even if it's not military, if it's some other way that you can do this, that you can say that I helped preserve this country and probably if you can come up with a way to make this country better. I'm open to any suggestions for that, especially cut taxes and raise my wages.
[Laughs.]

TW: Well, thanks for your time, sir.

DK: You're welcome.

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