

2007

Koster, Leon

Matt Hoehamer

Northwestern College - Orange City

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/vietnamveterans>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Northwest Iowa Vietnam Veterans by an authorized administrator of NWCommons. For more information, please contact ggrond@nwciowa.edu.

Narrator's Name: Leon Koster

Length of Interview: 80 min.

Date of Interview: 4/24/2007

Place of Interview:

Interviewer's Name: Matt Hoehamer

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

MH: All right, this is Matt Hoehamer interviewing Mr. Leon Koster on April 24, 2007 for the history of Vietnam course at Northwestern College. Thank you again for...

LK: You're welcome.

MH: ...agreeing to do this.

MH: I guess for starters, we can start at the beginning. I'd just thought I'd ask, what your views on Vietnam were before you went over there?

LK: That's a good question. It's hard to go back to the mid 1960s when this was going, that's forty-some years ago, but at the time...I was drafted in 1968, so before I went a lot of stuff had happened here in our country relative to the war, lot of discussion about it, lot of debates. I was opposed to the idea of a war, and I didn't fully understand why we were doing what we were doing. I didn't enlist. I didn't sign up to go. When I got drafted, that posed the problem or a question for me. What do I do? Do I accept the draft or do I not accept the draft? When I got drafted, I was 25 years old. But I had always lived in northwest Iowa and was born and raised in northwest Iowa. I had this feeling of patriotism and this feeling of when your country asks you to do something, you do it. Even though I had reservations about it, I was persuaded to do what my country asked me to do and to agree to join the army which is what I did. So my feelings about Vietnam were very ambivalent. I didn't understand it very well. I knew that it was contentious. I knew that it had caused a lot of division and debate in our country. So that was kind of my understanding of Vietnam at that point, not knowing much about its history, some but not very much, and not being sure that what we were doing was what should be done necessarily. So that's kind of the answer to that one.

MH: You mentioned you were opposed to the concept of the war over in Vietnam. Was there any specific reason?

LK: Well, yes. The reason was that we didn't see a national interest and that was the big debate. Was there a national interest for the United States to be halfway around the world in this little country going to war? And of course one side of the argument was that we had to stop communism there because if we didn't it was going to spread and we would be fighting them on the shores of California if it kept on going. The other was that we didn't know for sure what was happening there. Was it really a communistic threat or not? In retrospect, afterwards, I found out we really didn't have a very good idea about what was happening there. But at the time I didn't know that to that degree.

It's hard to describe how unsettled our country was. This is '07 and the spring of '07, where we're very much troubled about the war in Iraq and there's a lot of division about it and unsettled. But it was much more at that time. Our country was much more divided, and it was much more active division, protests, riots. Those kinds of things happening here were much more prevalent than they are now. One of the big reasons was that there was a draft at that time so everybody essentially got to go. Now, if you didn't sign up to go, you don't go. It's a volunteer. So the only ones that are there now are those that essentially stepped forward and said "I volunteer to join the military in some capacity" which was not the case in Vietnam at all which changed the dynamics of it, I mean, which made the dynamics of that far different from the dynamics of today.

MH: Let's see...you mentioned you were drafted in 1968?

LK: Yes.

MH: Would you care to describe a little about basic training?

LK: Sure.

MH: This kind of ties in. We did some readings about some veterans who said that they were prepared for combat but they weren't prepared for, that basic training didn't prepare them for the type of combat that they encountered in Vietnam, and I was just wondering if your opinion would agree with that or disagree.

LK: My opinion agrees with that to some degree. Once you get in the army, they'd train you for what they'd want you to do. The first is nine weeks of basic training and the reason it's called basic is that everybody goes through this. Essentially everybody goes through this training, whether you're going to be an infantry man, an artillery man, a clerk, a cook, no matter what, you're going through nine weeks of basic training. What they do there is they take your identity away and they give you a new identity. They shave your hair. They take all your clothes. You have to send all your clothes back. The only clothes you have are army clothes. The only haircut you have is an army haircut which is about an eighth of an inch in length and at that time, sort of like today I suppose, hairstyles... there were long-haired people at that time, like the stereotypical long-haired hippies.

I went to basic training in Fort Lewis, Washington, and we had several busloads and airplane loads of people coming up from the West Coast, where having long hair and being hippies was much more prevalent than it was in the Midwest. So these guys walked in one door with these raggedy clothes on and long hair and walked out the other door with no hair and army fatigues and that's the philosophy of the army. They take what you were and they get rid of that and they turn you into a soldier. So, they change your identity. You don't identify yourself as a whatever it was that you were before. You identify yourself as a soldier now. So, that's part of the army's philosophy. It's an intentional thing to change you into a soldier so you learn that.

Everything is done in formation. Nobody walks around in a group, in just an unorganized group. If there are two or three people, you walk in a formation. And again, the

philosophy is you are organized at all times. You are under control of somebody. You are in step and that's designed so that later on when you're given orders, you follow the orders. You don't ask why, you just do. That's part of what basic training does and it trains you, it teaches you things about the military custom and about the military way and how to march and basics about weapons. But the weapons that we did in basic had nothing to do with weapons in Vietnam. Nothing. We had M-6, M-14s and they essentially were not prevalent in Vietnam at all. The only people who had M-14s, the rifle like that, were snipers in Vietnam.

Then after nine weeks of basic training, then people are divided into their military occupational specialty, which is their MOS, and so that's where you go. If you are an infantry person, you take infantry training; if you are an artillery person, you take artillery training and so forth. So at the end of basic, people were anxious to find out where their next training was going to be because it kind of determined what their life was going to be like in the army. If you're going to be a cook or you're going to be a clerk typist, you're going to have a different life than if you're going to be an infantryman or an artilleryman. And I say man because there were no women at the time, at that time in the military. After nine weeks of that, we went to nine weeks of what was called AIT. AIT stands for Advanced Infantry Training. There they teach you how to be a member of the infantry, what it takes, infantry tactics, the weapons were the M-16s¹ now, which was what we used in Vietnam. But we're training to go to Vietnam and we're in Fort Lewis, Washington. There's not much similar between Fort Lewis, Washington and Vietnam. So, it was hard for them to make it real, like for Vietnam. But they tried, I suppose. We had some things that were set up like that.

My specific part of the infantry was to work with mortars, which were small, indirect fire pieces. But we were still considered infantry personnel, just like the people that carried regular machine guns and rifles and that kind of thing. It didn't get us ready for what happened in Vietnam, but I'm not sure how they could have gotten us ready for what happened in Vietnam. Maybe some training that took place in a place like they send you to Fort Polk, Louisiana, which was more climate-similar to Vietnam, or I suppose some training took place in Panama, but that'd be pretty expensive to send everybody to Panama. They didn't have the time for that. Some did go, some officers did go to Panama. I talked to some of them and I don't recall much about what they said in terms of that was better or worse than what we had.

So, were we ready? I'm not sure we were. Could've we been ready? That's a good question. I'm not sure what they could've put us through to get us ready for that. They did get us ready, they did try to get us ready mentally and to teach us that your job is to kill and that was pumped into us. Either you kill or you get killed and so here are all these people coming in and then they get, you get yelled at and swore at and so forth and told how to behave and taught to follow orders without question essentially and all of this is designed to win a war and to kill the enemy and that is what we learned how to do. So, the training was well-intentioned but I don't know what they could have done to make it better really.

¹ While other guns were used, the M16 rifle was carried by most American troops in Vietnam (Zabecki 398).

MH: I remember in class you mentioned at training you took an additional course, I believe, NCO² training. Would you care to describe that maybe a little, and how that was different?

LK: Right. After nine weeks of basic and then nine weeks of infantry training, the usual fare would be then, that you would be sent to Vietnam or wherever you're going to go and most of them would go to Vietnam. They'd try to talk some people into other training, additional training. One of them was officer's training. They'd also offered that, see, to become an officer. Well, that sounds nice and good, but in order to do that, you'd have to sign up for a couple more years in the service. I was drafted for two, and I had no desire to spend more than two years in the army.

The other was they needed non-commissioned officers. That would be sergeants. And so they had set up a school in Fort Benning, Georgia. Fort Benning, Georgia is the infantry school for the army. And they had set up a school there to train people that had been through AIT to become sergeants because they needed sergeants in Vietnam. So, that was six months more in the United States. Three months of training in Fort Benning, and then three more months of what they called "On the Job" training. You'd be training others. You'd be a sergeant and you'd be training others for three months and give you a chance to exercise leadership and see what that looked like. The theory was that when you got to Vietnam, then you not only were a sergeant, you had already been a sergeant to other soldiers and you were used to giving directions and orders and leading other people, which is what they needed in the infantry in Vietnam. So I did that. I went from Fort Lewis, Washington to Fort Benning, Georgia and spent three months there. That school was a mortars' NCO school as well. We learned everything about mortars, how to organize them, how to set them up, how to fire them, how to direct the fire for them, how to run a mortar cruise, and what that meant. We were the first NCO School for mortars. Most of them were just straight infantry. They taught them infantry basics. They taught them how to run squads and firing maneuver, how to lead troops in combat, and we were taught how to lead troops in combat too but with the mortars and how to organize them and set them up in a combat situation. We were the first school, the first group like that, and the army decided, I guess, they needed that.

It wasn't like OCS³. One of the things they do is teach discipline, so there's a lot of spit and polish. You had to have everything just so in your barracks and your person and your shoes and your uniform had to be just so and there was a lot of emphasis on that. Again, the order and the idea was have you be a disciplined soldier, know what the rules are, follow rules. Be a person of the organization and having the organization be in the army. Have that be your goal, whatever the goals of that you'd unquestionably follow those and do those things. We lived in barracks. We had platoons of 30 or 40 people in a barracks and we had a company of, I suppose, 150 people, and we went around Fort Benning firing mortars and doing drills and learning discipline. You learned about the military code of justice. You learned about communications, how to run radios. You learned about medicine, you learned about first aid, how to do that. And what the army thought you

² Non-Commissioned Officer.

³ Officer Candidate School.

needed to know in order to be a leader of troops in combat. That was January, February, March of 1969 for me. And then April, May and June, I went back to Fort Lewis, Washington. So I went from one corner of the country, Fort Lewis, Washington to Fort Benning which is way in the other corner, and then I went back to the other corner for three more months, and was a sergeant in a platoon of people that had just gotten out of basic and were going through AIT. And they needed people to take them to the training sites and watch them and make sure they kept the barracks clean and they didn't get into trouble and punish them if they did a bit and that kind of thing. So I was a sergeant for a group of people that were going through that kind of training, that level of training, just following basic training.

MH: Okay.

LK: And at the end of that, on June 13th, which happened to be a Friday the 13th, I got orders for Vietnam.

MH: All right.

LK: I was worried about that and not being a real suspicious person, it didn't worry me much. But I thought about getting orders on Friday the 13th.

MH: That would be...yes.

LK: Yes, that got my attention. [Laughs.] I didn't worry about that particularly much though. So then I was ordered to...I could take a couple weeks, I guess, off. Came back to Sioux County, came back here and then I left for...I went back to Fort Lewis again at the end of June and by the second of July I was in Vietnam.

MH: Okay.

LK: And as you go to Vietnam, you go with a rank that you have and the training that you have but you have no idea what unit you're going to. You get to Vietnam, get off the plane, you're blasted by the heat and humidity that just knocks you right off your pins even though it was summer here. It was July here, but it was nothing like the heat and humidity that's over there. It's indescribable.

MH: When you got over to Vietnam, would you be able to maybe describe your experiences once you were there, from anything you'd like to tell, from down time to maybe missions or relationships that were formed.

LK: Sure. I was assigned to the First Air Cav, the First Air Cavalry, which is the unit that had pioneered in Vietnam the concept of quick reaction by flying troops to various places in helicopters and the idea of being mobile that you wouldn't be limited by walking to someplace or riding on a truck or train – they didn't have trains but on trucks. They would pick you up in helicopters and fly you someplace. That's the unit I was assigned to.

And when I told them I had done all this training in the mortars, they looked at me and

laughed and said we don't care. You're in the infantry and I was assigned to an infantry company that was in Quan Loi area up in Parrot's Beak region near Cambodia. First of all, we started near Saigon in a place called Bien Hoa, where the First Air Cav. has its headquarters. And then they get you used to a few things. They get you acclimated and make sure that you're over jetlag and they assign you to a unit, to a company. So I was assigned to the Bravo Company, the first, the eighth. I got to Quan Loi, first part of July, and the company was out in the jungle somewhere near there and so they got resupplied every third day, so I waited around for that resupply day and when they send out the supplies, they also send out new people. There was a couple of us and we got on the helicopter and flew off to where they were and got off the helicopter and then I was in war.

You're dropped off and you're assigned to a platoon, a platoon of 25 to 30 people that has three squads. Each squad has two gun teams, or has two teams – one's a rifle team, one's a gun team. The gun team means machine gun, and I was assigned to be in charge of the rifle team of the first squad of the first platoon and we were out in an area that was just off the Ho Chi Minh Trail⁴ full of Vietcong and NVA⁵ that were coming down the trail, marching, headed toward Saigon and it was our job to find them, stop them.

One of the big things at that time was General Westmoreland⁶ was the commander of all the forces at that time. And they kind of bought into something called the war of attrition. Well, the war of attrition means you're going to kill more of them than they're going to kill of you and eventually you're going to win because you're going to kill more of them. So killing them and killing large numbers of them was a big deal. So we would be patrolling, walking through all kinds of terrain, rubber plantations, rice paddies and jungles were pretty much it. We'd be going on patrols, looking for trails, looking for bunkers, looking for evidence that they were there. Sometimes when we would do that, we would get ambushed, sometimes we would ambush them. We would set up ambushes and we would ambush them. Sometimes they would hear us coming and they would wait for us and when we were vulnerable, they would attack. We lost quite a few people from our company, wounded and killed, which was just kind of a standard fare. You just knew that was going to happen and you just did things the best you could do to keep yourself safe. Make sure that your tactics were right, you were doing things when you patrolled, you were watching, you were being watchful and not letting somebody surprise you, making sure you saw them before they saw you.

MH: You mentioned the patrols. Was it hard to stay quiet on the patrols with all the jungle?

LK: Yeah. We would walk through the jungle as a company sometimes and then it was real hard because if you were in the jungle, the first person called the walking point would

⁴ The Ho Chi Minh trail was a "network of roads that stretched from North Vietnam through eastern Laos to South Vietnam." It was an important supply route for North Vietnam and therefore the United States tried to limit its use (Leary 289).

⁵ North Vietnamese Army; also known as People's Army of Vietnam.

⁶ Westmoreland served as commander of the ground forces in Vietnam from 1964 until 1968. He was named chief of staff of the US Army in 1968, still working closely on the strategy in Vietnam (Hamburger 634-635).

have to sometimes cut their way through. So you'd be hacking through this jungle and it's hard to do that quietly. So, it was hard to do that part quietly.

There's a difference between the company moving and patrolling. The company moving meant that the whole company was going to another spot, then you would stop and you'd set up a perimeter, set up a circle, and then some would go out on patrols. So they would not take their full pack with them. They'd take all the ammunition they could carry, radios, grenades, and things like that, but they usually wouldn't take their bedroll or their personal stuff or maybe they wouldn't take much food. They'd take some water probably. But they would go out for maybe a couple of miles on a patrol. They would go out and make a loop and come back to the place where the main command post of the company was set up. Then the idea was that by doing that, this one company could check out a large area of the jungle, and the patrols would be like either a squad which would be about eight or ten guys or twelve or a team which would be half that. A squad is made up of two teams, which would be half that. So I took the gun team, or the rifle team rather, on patrols a couple times. And we would go out, luckily for me, our patrols were never ambushed. Some were, ours happened to not to be. It wasn't anything I did or did not do. It's just that that's where why we happened to go where they weren't. Others happened to go where they were.

Companies also consist of three regular platoons and one platoon called a weapons platoon and that weapons platoon would carry a mortar sometimes. Some infantry companies carried mortars and our company did, and I was a mortar person, but I wasn't assigned to that platoon. It seems it makes sense that I would be, having that's where I had all my training, but they didn't see it that way. Well then later on, after being out there with the company, doing this for a few months, I did move from the first platoon to the fourth platoon and the fourth platoon was much smaller. There were about eight to nine of us. I was the senior person so I was the platoon leader for that platoon. But it wasn't that big a group. It was only, like I said, eight or nine. And we didn't have a mortar. We carried something called a 90 millimeter recoilless rifle, which is a bazooka-like device. It's a tube about, well, its 90 millimeters round and about four feet long and metal. If you carried it all day, it got to be pretty heavy. The ammunition for it was rounds of ammunition that were 90 millimeters, which is about that much [showing how big it is with his hands] and all the ammunition you had was what you carry on your back. Well, it's hard to carry 20 or 30 of those, so you pass those around to other people in the company and if something happens where that is needed, then you have to go around and collect all those rounds of ammunition. You get them over to where you are because you need to get the ammunition to the gun in order for the gun to make any sense.

Several months of my tour out in the jungle and rice paddies and rubber plantations was the fourth platoon. While I was there, we ran into several ambushes. We came across bunker complexes, found huge stacks of weapons, weapon caches that they had put up. We were mortared several times by them. We were in one of their bunker complexes and they knew right where that bunker complex was so they knew where to fire the mortars because they could hear us in there. It just went on, days and days and days just went on

like that, just walking, marching through the jungles, through rice paddies, get resupplied every third day with water and food and ammunition. No showers. Change of clothes every two weeks or so maybe.

The company being directed by the commanders above the company commander level, telling them from whatever information they had, whatever intelligence they had that there was evidence of enemy activity in this spot or that spot. If that was distance from where we were, we were ordered to go to a clearing, they sent helicopters, picked us up. We would get on the helicopters, fly to this other area, get dropped off, start patrolling and moving around in that area. Sometimes, we'd do that a couple times a day, not very often more than once a day, but there were a couple of times we did it more than once a day. We'd do it at least two or three times a week. All the discomforts of being out there, having to provide for yourself and dig a foxhole every night and be worried about this or that, always on guard. You didn't walk four or five steps without your rifle and your helmet. It just became part of you almost. You got to feeling uncomfortable if you would walk a ways and realize that you didn't have both of those, so you'd have to retrieve them.

Life as an infantry soldier in Vietnam was a combination of extreme boredom punctuated by segments of sheer terror. Much of it was boring. You'd just walk and walk and walk. But then it was preferable to the sheer terror parts, where you're getting shot at. I remember flying from Saigon to Quan Loi the first time I joined the company, got up in this little aircraft and looked out and I could see all these bomb craters. And that was one of the first times that it really sunk in, even though I cognitively knew it before, but it really sunk in now this is war, they're dropping bombs, and there are people out there that want to kill me. They would want to see me dead and they're right there and they may be right there. And that's just kind of an unnerving feeling knowing that there's just a whole bunch of people that want to see you dead. Well, that's we tried to do to them too.

If anything, this concept of war, it is such a horrendous, horrendous state that it's hard to describe how terrible war is. The old saying is "war is hell," but if there's something worse than hell, that's what it is. It's worse than that, it's terrible. War gets glorified. There're all kinds of movies about war and all this glorification of war. People that have been in combat don't want war to take place. Real combat. They don't want war to take place. It's terrible. No one else should have to go through that.

- MH: You mentioned a little bit, how it was a lot of boredom interspersed by sheer terror. I realize it was war and so even in down time, you might not have had things that would have been real fun or anything, but what kinds of things did you do, in this down time, that might have made it a little more enjoyable or like home or something?
- LK: That's a good question. That's a very good question. I did a couple things. One was I read. I carried a book with me usually, so I would read. Another is for a while we played checkers. I have pictures of playing checkers out in the jungle. We had this little magnetic checker board and so a few of us, when we'd stop... A certain number of us would have to be on guard, but we'd take turns with that so some of us would play checkers once in awhile. That was about it. You'd read and write letters, but when you're

there, you don't carry a radio. So, there's nothing like that. There were no recordings, the recording devices that, well, there were, but there was nothing that we did musically. In other words, you didn't carry a Walkman or have an iPod or something like that where you had music. First of all, music would be loud and one of the times you would be able, you'd have time to listen to something like that would be at night but at night you'd had to be extremely quiet and so that was nonexistent.

The other downtime would be after two or three weeks out in the jungles, rice paddies, and rubber plantations, they'd give you a day or two break pulling guard on a fire support base, and these were all over South Vietnam. They were a couple of football fields in size, and they had artillery pieces there. They would provide artillery support to the various people operating in that area. And if you got to pull guard there for a couple nights, it was considered a rest because you didn't have to walk during the day. During the day time, it was usually pretty safe during the day time. Somebody had to be on guard, but it wasn't a vigilant guarding and most of the people could take a shower. That's when you would get mail and you could get some packages at that time. You wouldn't get packages out in the field because you couldn't carry that stuff with you. So you could get packages and get some goodies from home sometimes. My wife was a wonderful, wonderful sender of packages, and she was really, really good at making chocolate chip cookies and not only making really good chocolate chip cookies, making them and storing them and sending them so that when they arrived there, they were in wonderful condition. So I enjoyed the chocolate chip cookies and I could trade them for just about anything I wanted. [Laughs] They were amazing currency for all kinds of wonderful stuff. Well I should say stuff; there wasn't that much wonderful stuff I could trade for out there. But favors or things like that. Those things were good, and anything from home was good. But reading and checkers and just BSing with the guys, that was about it.

MH: Okay.

LK: Where we were, there were no clubs, or PXes or weekends passes. Those were nonexistent. They just didn't happen. It was just 24/7, you're on duty. The only time you got to do that was... They did kind of guarantee you one R&R⁷ during your time there so one week they would send you on a break, and usually it took seven to eight months in country before you qualified for that. The approved R&R places were, as I recall, Sydney, Australia; Bangkok; Taiwan; Hong Kong; and Hawaii. And most of those that chose Hawaii chose to meet girlfriends or spouses in Hawaii. Spouses mainly, because girlfriends couldn't get the deals in those days, they didn't recognize that although they did. But you weren't allowed to go anywhere else other than Hawaii. Some did. Some snuck back to the United States. They broke the rules. You were allowed to go to Hawaii, but you weren't allowed to go back to the states. They had flights scheduled for you too, from Vietnam to all these places. So that was one week.

⁷ Military acronym for rest and recuperation or rest and recreation.

I got malaria⁸ in November, late October, November of '69 and that disease took me out. I wound up in a hospital for a few weeks, in the Third Field Hospital in Saigon and then I went to the Sixth Convalescent Center in Cam Ranh Bay for three, four more weeks because malaria really lays you low and wears you out and you need to build your strength back up before you can go back. The convalescent center was obviously not just for malaria people. It was for those that were wounded but only wounded to a degree where they could recuperate and stay in Vietnam and go back to service. So they were minor wounds, relatively speaking, at Cam Ranh Bay. After they'd been in the hospital, they'd recuperate at Cam Ranh Bay.

MH: Was sickness really widespread or were there pretty good measures to avoid it?

LK: It was not widespread. There were several that got malaria. You had malaria pills, and even though I took my malaria pills like I was asked to, like the medics prescribed, I still got malaria. But it wasn't real widespread where we were, I don't know what percent it was, but it wasn't very big, some, but not a lot. If you did get it, if you didn't have malaria to a bad degree, if it wasn't a serious, serious case... Some didn't take their pills because they thought they'd get malaria and they could take a break. Well, I didn't see it that way. I knew you could die from malaria and not wanting to run that risk and not thinking that's a good idea to will yourself sick, I tried to avoid it, but I didn't avoid it completely, obviously.

But it was a great group of people that I was with. They were some of the most genuine, hardworking, wonderful, bravest. I saw people do things, tremendous acts of bravery and courage and helping. You quickly learned that you would do anything for anybody and they would do anything for you. So, that kind of relationship was what kept you going, and you knew that if you did a good job at that and stayed fortunate, and you did it for 365 days, you could come home.

People I was with, other than a few new guys that came out, the new guys were called "cherries" as in virgins, and they were cherries until they got shot at. So when you got there you were a cherry, you were a virgin until you got shot at. Then once that happened, you realized that some guys came out and they were going to win the war, they were going to earn a chestful of medals, and this was what they wanted to do. They wanted to be soldiers. Well, it didn't take long for them to realize that this was a mess, and it was a mess that they could not get out of, and a war that we weren't going to win. It wasn't going to be a trample march into Hanoi. We didn't see that as what we were going to accomplish. We saw what we wanted to accomplish was to stay alive for 365 days, so we could come home. That's what we wanted to do. So, we would have calendars on our helmets, on our helmet liners. There was a cloth helmet liner over the steel pots that we wore, a camouflaged helmet liner, and you'd draw calendars on there, you'd mark the months off and then when you got to you last few months, you'd make it into days, and you'd mark off days, and the whole focus was on staying alive until you could go home. That was the goal.

⁸ A disease spread by mosquitoes that causes chills, fever, and anemia. While rare in the United States during this time, it was more common in Vietnam (Blake 213-214).

MH: Okay. Going back just a little, we've read accounts and heard people say that in Vietnam, the U.S. owned the day and the VC⁹ owned the night. Would you say that's true and from your experience that's an accurate statement of the situation?

LK: That's a very accurate statement according to my experience. During the day, we would walk around and pretty much have control of things. We'd be in the villages and we would not be bothered in the villages. We would not think of being in those villages at night. We would move during the day, they would move during the night. They would sleep during the day, we slept during the night. Now there were some crossovers. We set up some ambushes at night. Sometimes we set up what were called automatic ambushes where we knew of certain trails that they might walk down and we'd set up trip wires across the trails and hook them to claymore mines¹⁰ and that worked a couple of times where in the middle of the night, we heard this claymore blow up, the next morning we went out there and sure enough there's a couple people dead. So we did that at night once in awhile and once in a while during the day they would ambush us, but most of the time it was a dance almost. We would move during the day and try to find where they were sleeping during the night and they would move during the night trying to avoid us and they would try to get where they wanted to go during the night, so that they could travel and make time when we were, generally, they knew we were not going to be moving around at night. We weren't going to be walking around at night. They knew we were going to be holed up in a particular spot. Once in awhile they knew that and they would attack during the night because again the night was their time. They would attack either companies that were set up at night or they would attack fire support bases where there were artillery pieces. They would attack those at night sometimes. Attacks were vicious and were scary, scary, scary things. So, I would concur mightily with us generally being in charge of the day and them generally be, having this way during the nighttime.

MH: All right, let's see. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your time over in Vietnam?

LK: Just a word about drugs, I suppose. Drugs were really, really prevalent in Vietnam. They were easy to get. Low price, high quality, and there were many, many soldiers that took part in drugs. The most prevalent probably would be marijuana. There were others as well, but marijuana was the, at least where I was, the one that I saw the most of. The culture of the military, of the infantry was do things to stay alive, do things to keep your buddies alive, do things that accomplish a mission. That would be the third thing – you keep yourself alive, you keep your buddies alive, and if the mission gets accomplished, that's down the road. And it was hard for us to know what the mission was all the time, at least from my perspective. Now, from other people's, they may have known, but from an infantry person's perspective, you were told to go here, sit there, ambush this trail and you didn't have a feeling like well, today the whole army has made this much advancing, like in thinking of World War II, we're going across Europe and we made x number of

⁹ Viet Cong. This term was used for Communist forces in South Vietnam by the United States military (Coffey et al. 878).

¹⁰ Claymore mines, activated both by command and trip-wire, "sprayed steel fragments in a fan-shaped pattern 2 meters in height and 50 meters in width" (Bunker 442).

miles today. That kind of concept never, never, never came across in Vietnam. You never got this feeling because you would go through an area and wipe something out and then you'd leave it and you'd go back a month later and wipe it out again. So, you didn't take and hold turf. The idea was to kill. The idea was to have attrition. You were going to kill more of them and keep them from doing what they wanted to do which was build up their forces and overrun South Vietnam. And you were going to prevent that by killing them, not by occupying a land and keeping it and its occupants and keeping it safe. There were several plans to have safe villages and things like that and to win the hearts and minds of the people. They were well-intentioned but they didn't work very well because we didn't understand their culture. We didn't understand what it took to win their hearts and minds. We used our standards, what it would take to win our hearts and minds. That isn't what it took to win their hearts and minds.

MH: Okay. You mentioned a couple times the strategy. . . when you were over in Vietnam was a strategy of attrition. Being on the ground, would you say that this was a correct or incorrect strategy to take as someone who was down there, in the actual ground? Would you disagree with this type of a strategy in Vietnam?

LK: That's a good question. That's a very good question. Yeah, I disagree with the strategy because it didn't accomplish what the goal was, of the stated goal of our being there, the United States government being there, which was to secure South Vietnam as a democracy. And one of the reasons that was tough to do is because there really wasn't a democracy there to secure. Not much of one of any quality at least. And so the idea of killing more of them and having them stop doing what they were doing because we killed so many of them, we didn't understand that they were going to keep sending people until we wore out, no matter how many they took.

And deaths... People would say "Well, they don't value life." Yeah, they do value life. They didn't want to die but people didn't want to die in World War II either or people didn't want to die in the Revolutionary War either, but they saw as the goal something that was attainable and worthy dying for and that's why they did that. The leadership of the NVA and the Viet Cong, whether they were right or wrong, they may have been merciless too, I guess, they knew that and they knew they could just send people until whatever, and x-number were going to die but they had x-number and y-number and they were going to keep on going. So our plan of wearing them down by doing that was futile. It was doomed from the start. It just was never going to accomplish the goal of a free, democratic South Vietnam, or even all of Vietnam but we were just worried about South Vietnam. We wanted that to be, the government would say at that time, we wanted that to be a viable country which stops communism from coming down from China into North Vietnam and then down into Laos and into South Vietnam and then continuing on down into Indonesia and so forth. So we're going to have this blocking spot here called South Vietnam. We're going to support them. Well, it was flawed. It was just not going to happen.

And some of that is, I am saying that in retrospect because I know now but I also, after studying it more after I got out, I read a lot of history of South Vietnam, and history of Vietnam, the history of Southeast Asia. And if people had read that before, they would

have realized that what we were doing there was never going to get done what we wanted to get done. We did just not understand those people. And even though there are...I have fellow veterans here who would disagree with me. They would say we could have won the war. You put in enough military, we had better support back home and kept Jane Fonda¹¹ out of North Vietnam, we would have won that war. Well, I don't think so. Even if we could have thrown in enough military might to impose some kind of solution or some kind of situation, it would not have lasted because it was not the will of the people there. Just like the British being here, in colonial times, that was not the will of the people and it was not going to last and it didn't last. We didn't last there. The French didn't last there. The French got thrown out before we did. So it was really sad.

MH: All right. Would you like to maybe discuss when you came home now, after your tour in Vietnam, maybe the reactions you got, if any, or just maybe your experiences?

LK: Coming home was a psychological whiplash kind of condition because of...Let me tell you about "the world" and "not the world," give you a reference for me coming home. When we were in Vietnam, when we talked about the United States, we called it "the world" and we called it "the world" because that place, Vietnam, was out of this world and so "the world" meant our home, meant family and our country. So, coming back to "the world," to us, it was the ultimate thing to do. We all wanted to go back to "the world." Well, we get back to "the world" and we find "the world" has changed. We're not welcomed back like you might think returning soldiers from a war would be welcomed back. Many were scorned and shunned and spat upon. I was not spat upon and I was not shunned by friends and neighbors but I was married. My wife was one of the reasons I made it through the war because I knew she was there and I conducted myself in a way that made sure that I was going to get back to her. So I credit her with my coming home. I came home, she was there, that was wonderful, but the process of getting out of the service in Oakland, flying from San Francisco to Denver, from Denver to Omaha was one of...I was ignored. Shunned wouldn't be the right word. I was ignored. They may say, "Well, we just left them alone." Well, that may be but I prefer to look at it as I was ignored. I was an embarrassment. And I also was a threat to them. They didn't know what to expect. Vietnam veterans experienced all kinds of things and behaved sometimes in bizarre ways so they were leery of confronting or of approaching someone because they didn't know what they were going to get. I understand that.

But I came home, had the culture shock of coming home and being here and enjoying the wonderful attributes of United States and mid-America and soon got back into teaching school, going to grad school right away. I came back and a few days later I started grad school at the University of South Dakota. In the fall, I started teaching school again. I got out in June 2 of 1970 and went to summer school, taught school, and went about my life and did not do much or talk about much or think... Well, it's not the thinking part. I thought about Vietnam all the time but I didn't say that to anybody or very few people and one of the reasons was you just didn't get asked that much. Then again, because the

¹¹ 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 215-216).

country was leery what they were going to hear and subconsciously I don't know that they wanted to hear anything about it because it wasn't a good deal. It wasn't coming back from Germany or the South Pacific after World War II as victors or anything like that. It was this ugly, festering sore that was going on. And so, veterans came back. I was very fortunate that I was in good physical health. Mental health question I'll leave up to the judgment of others. Many did not come back that way. Many were more vulnerable than I was and they were younger, more impressionable, and Vietnam just turned their life into a mess and they could never get past it. And many of them experienced much, much, much more traumatic things than I experienced too, being wounded or having to do more graphic killing themselves than what I did. You can't just expect people like that to come back to society and then just to go on as if nothing happened. It's just not logical. And that's the way with all wars. It's going to be the way with Afghanistan and Iraq. We're going to see the remnants of that for years to come. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder¹² will be a major thing just as it is for my friends. I have friends who last time they were in combat was 37 years ago. They go to counseling right now, after 37, 38 years, some of them. And they should. We need to take care of those that we send to do this kind of stuff. It's us that did it and it's us that should take care of them. So I was glad to be home, but it was bittersweet in that respect, in the respect of how the country as a whole welcomed home those that had been there.

MH: Okay. Vietnam was one of the... When many people think of it, they associate the anti-war movement and have images of that. What were your opinions or maybe even experiences or thoughts about the anti-war movement and what it meant to Vietnam War as a whole and maybe any influences that it had?

LK: That's a good question too. I had close, personal friends who chose not to get drafted, chose to avoid it. My opinion, I respect them. I respect their decisions. If their decision was that they analyze the situation and thought it was morally wrong to do that and chose then not to, I respect that, because that's them following their conscious, conscience rather, as opposed to somebody who just is beating the draft because they don't want to go through that themselves. They think maybe others should but they aren't going to. Well that isn't what some of the people that I know, that isn't what they thought. They thought that no one should and it was wrong to do so. So, if they had gone, they would have violated their own conscience. They would have gone against what they thought was right. Well, it's hard to tell people you have to do something that you think is wrong. What sense does that make? Many of us went in a state of confusion. I went thinking I'm not sure this is right but our country says it is. Maybe they know something I don't know. My conservative, patriotic sense had always been to follow orders and I love my country so I did that. But others looked at it more in-depth and said, "Yes I love my country too, but in this case our country has made a mistake and I'm not going to do that."

For those of us there, what did the anti-war movement here mean? We didn't hear that much about it. We knew it was taking place. I didn't feel, nor did I sense others feel, this

¹² First used to describe reactions in Vietnam War veterans, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is now used to describe sufferers of other traumatic experiences. PTSD may manifest soon after the traumatic incident or could be delayed for years (Spinrad 580-582).

open hostility toward them, even those that were there. We had this running deal about those that weren't there. Those that weren't there were always messing with our girlfriends and our wives and we always kind of made caustic and ugly jokes about that kind of stuff. But I think many of us secretly thought, "Yeah, that's where I want to be." And not all. There are some. I have some friends now, veterans, friends of mine that were in the same company I was in who, you ask them that question, they would say those people hurt us. They didn't help us. They gave comfort to the enemy. They gave support to the enemy and that made our situation worse. I don't believe that. I think that the enemy would have done what they did even if there hadn't been that kind of situation. The enemy was not driven by the anti-war actions of the United States. The enemy was driven by what they wanted to get done in Southeast Asia. Now, the fact that they may have been doing something that some people would judge to be right, and some people in the United States said we should let them alone. If they want to do that, that's their business. Why are we sticking our nose in over there? They didn't mind that there was that kind of sentiment back in the United States. In other words, the enemy of us there – North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong – didn't mind that there was that sentiment but that isn't what drove them. That isn't what made them stronger. What made them do what they did and what made them strong was their conviction that what they were doing was ridding their country of these invaders. That's what their perspective was.

So my position about the anti-war and the demonstrations against the war is somewhat different than what you might find from most veterans. They might say, "Well, I'm a veteran and I was in the war and I wanted everybody here to be behind me." Well, I kind of wanted everybody here to be behind me too because I wanted it to be right. And that being the reason. And that would be the reason they would be behind me because what I was doing was an honorable and right thing for me to do. Well, there was a question about whether it was the right and honorable thing for me to do. And that's hard for me to say. I mean I spent a year over there and sacrificed and there were buddies over there, friends of mine, that aren't alive today because of that. It just said they died for this cause which has some question to it. That makes it tough. Nobody wants to die for a worthless cause. If there is a death, there is a loss, you'd want it to be for something. Tough questions.

MH: You mentioned that there would be other veterans who thought that the anti-war movement hurt the war. Do you think that maybe that sentiment was a factor in anything? Maybe soldiers heard that people back home were protesting and heard that someone like Jane Fonda would go over to Hanoi and say you're doing a good job to the enemy that they were fighting. Do you think that whether people like soldiers agreed with it or not that that did have a mental burden on them or put a mental burden on them?

LK: That's a good question and a good observation and it did. I think one of the effects of that was that it caused despair and it caused them to think, "Why am I doing this?" if that's the case. Then being over there and sensing the reality of it and saying "Gee, maybe they've got a point" and that leading to behaviors over there which were detrimental to themselves – alcohol and drugs and other activities that were not in their best physical, for sure not in their physical best interest. I mean they harm themselves. They harm themselves mentally and physically by engaging in behaviors that were destructive. It

may be that they did some of those, did more of those, because of that condition of the anti-war and knowing that there was this feeling, “Good grief, I’m over here and they’re doing that over there, what the heck? Where’s the next marijuana hit coming from? Let me at it.” So that may have played a part for some of them.

I think a bigger thing in pushing people over there to destructive behaviors was the way the war was conducted over there and the seeming futility of the activity over there. It wasn’t this “We’re on line here” and “We’re moving north” and “We’re clearing this area” and “All of us are moving along.” I heard somebody say one time Vietnam was not a “table-top war.” In other words, it wasn’t a war where you could sit at a table and say “Okay, you draw a line and say okay, here we are today and tomorrow we hope to be there and that’s where the enemy is” and put dots and Xs. You couldn’t do that because they were there and we were there. We were all occupying the same territory, right next to each other sometimes, passing each other, so it’s just a mess. Even like the Civil War, all the other wars you could think of almost, had clear lines of the front. There was the front and there was the rear. The front was where the battle was and the rear was not. Well, Vietnam had no fronts and rears. Everything was a front.

MH: Since coming home and maybe reading about Vietnam and since it happened, learning more about the overall big picture of things, have your views or opinions changed or has learning more influenced you or maybe helped-or maybe not help-but contribute to your experience?

LK: It very much did. I became a student of Vietnam after I got home. Stanley Karnow’s book *History of Vietnam*¹³ is one of the best books written, and I recommend it to everybody who’s thinking about finding out about Vietnam. It’s a thick history of Vietnam and the first part of it, you’re wondering “Why am I reading this old stuff about Vietnam?” But then later on you realize why you’re reading that because that sets the foundation for current, well, 1960-1970 time, today too. You’re finding out about the history of Vietnam is one thing, then finding out about the conduct of the war and how it was orchestrated and why it was done the way it was done and the mistakes that were made there is another part. So, after I got back, right after I got back, I had this feeling of personal knowledge about the futility of war and futility about that particular war. But then reading about it and getting more understanding of the history and the cultures of Vietnam, the societies that were involved, so the sociology of the place as well as the history of the place, it greatly influenced my feelings about it, my understandings of it. It caused me to be, on one hand, more frustrated because I came to this conclusion that my country had asked me to do something that I wished they hadn’t asked me to do and that they had misread the situation and that by doing that they had let me down and they had put me, and there’s 57, 58 thousand people that are dead now because of that decision and hundreds of thousands wounded and hundreds of thousands others whose lives have been affected by it, not only those who were there, but their friends and relatives back home. And all of that is because of some, in my judgment, mistakes that were made in knowing and understanding history and understanding peoples in other parts of the world. And our failure to do an adequate job of doing that has cost us. And as I say those words,

¹³ Karnow’s book, published in 1983, is titled *Vietnam: A History*.

I can't help but think of April 24, 2007, and what's going on today. We need to do a better job of doing that.

MH: Yeah, we've been studying stuff and there are a lot of similarities between...

LK: A lot of similarities.

MH: ...the situation of Vietnam and Iraq. Particularly, one thing that kind of stuck out was being prepared and ready to go in. I know we read in Vietnam, when we first got involved, the administrators we sent over didn't know anything about the country and no one could speak the language and the same was in Iraq. I think, the last statistics I read, out of the thousand administrators we have over there, six can speak some Arabic and I think they said three are considered fluent.

LK: Yeah, that's a good observation. Very good. You have to step back and ask yourself "Why? What are we thinking here?" It calls citizens to be active. It calls all of us to, in a democracy, we can't say that necessarily these other people are responsible because in a democracy we're supposed to run the show. People are supposed to do that. It's incumbent upon all of us to learn all we can know so that decisions that are made are the right decisions and are really in our best interest.

MH: And on that subject, would you think going to Vietnam influenced the way that you looked at U.S. policy and governmental decisions and things like that, maybe look more closely at the reasoning behind them?

LK: Exactly. I think you're right. I think it has. It's caused me to be a more active citizen. Sometimes even when I think, "Oh no, I'm not going to get involved in this one," for some reason, I can't stay on the sidelines. I just have to get in and do something or I wind up doing something. And after I do that, "How did I get in this?" Well, now I look back on it and think, "Well, I know how I got into that. I got into it because I thought that's the right thing for a citizen to do." You have to do that. You got to put yourself on the line a bit. You got to put yourself, find out the facts of the case, whatever it may be, get yourself educated on the issues, and then use some moral judgment and make a decision as to what you think should happen or who you think should be in charge making other decisions. My experience in Vietnam has caused me to be a more active citizen, which is a good thing.

MH: Is there anything you'd like to add as a whole or as an endnote or you got everything covered?

LK: I think that that says pretty much what I feel and what my experiences were in Vietnam and how I feel about them and how I think we should proceed, basic principles for proceeding in the current situations and in future situations.

MH: All right. Thank you very much for taking the time to be interviewed for this.

LK: You're welcome, Matt.

Works Cited

- Blake, John B. "Malaria." *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. Vol. 5. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. 213-215. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 3 Apr. 2012.
- Bunker, Robert J. "Mines, Antipersonnel and Antitank." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998. 442. Print.
- Coffey, David, et al. "Glossary." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Vol. 2. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998. 873-878. Print.
- Hamburger, K. E. "Westmoreland, William." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996. 634-636. Print.
- Leary, William M. "Ho Chi Minh Trail." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998. 289-291. Print.
- Spinrad, Phoebe S. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Vol. 2. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998. 580-583. Print.
- Welsh, James Michael. "Fonda, Jane Seymour." *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998. 215-216. Print.