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## Sandbulte, Robert

Sarah Bartz

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Narrator's name: Robert Sandbulte  
Length of interview: 22:58  
Date of interview: July 10, 2012  
Place of interview: Steen, MN  
Interviewer's name: Sarah Bartz  
For: Northwest Iowa Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project

SB: This is Sarah Bartz and Robert Sandbulte in his home in Steen, Minnesota on July 10, 2012. Robert, can you just kind of start off by telling me where you grew up and what life was like for you?

RS: I was born in Sioux Center, Iowa. In first grade, I moved to Edgerton, Minnesota and lived there until 1971 when I went into the service under the Marine Corps. I enrolled into the Marine Corps in January of my senior year in high school. Then I went to basic training in May. On the day of my high school graduation, I left for basic training.

SB: So you missed graduation?

RS: Yes.

SB: Okay.

RS: Which wasn't a big deal to me at the time because I don't like ceremonies. Afterwards, people weren't too real happy with my decision to do that. Anyway, I had basic training in San Diego, California. When they recruited me, they told me I would be, they would train me to be a radio operator. Being a small-town farm boy, I thought that was some pretty big stuff. But then the first thing that they told me when I went to school to be a radio operator was that as a radio operator you were the number one target in combat. That was a bit of a reality check.

SB: Yes.

RS: And then after school in San Diego, then I went to Okinawa<sup>1</sup>. That was sort of a jumping off point for Vietnam at that time. But by the time I got to Okinawa they were starting to pull troops out of Vietnam. So I ended up spending 15 months in Okinawa and then I came back to the United States and was discharged. That was in May of '73 then, so I spent two years in the Marine Corps.

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<sup>1</sup> Okinawa is an island in Japan where the United States military maintains a number of bases; it served as a central location for deploying America's military efforts in Vietnam. (Okinawa)

SB: In high school, did you have a desire to sign up for the service? What was the attitude toward the Vietnam War in the community? Was that something that people...

RS: I think that people were, at that point, still pretty supportive of us being there. I guess I could say I felt it was a patriotic duty but the draft was still going on at that time, although there was a lottery so my chances of getting drafted were smaller than what they had been before. I thought as long as I don't have any other huge obligations I could just as well get the military out of the way.

My oldest brother was in the Marine Corps too. He had signed up for four years but he got quite a bit more training; he was an electrician on helicopters. He told me to just sign up for two years and if I like it he said then I could sign up for two more. Obviously, I decided to get out at that point.

I think there was good support in the community. As far as when I got home, there weren't a lot of people who tapped me on the back or anything like that, you know. I didn't have any of the real bad experiences like a lot of other people did, getting stuff thrown at them, that sort of thing.

SB: How did your family feel about you going into the service, especially with your brother being in?

RS: I really didn't realize how tough that was until my own son went in. I realized it was pretty hard on mom and dad. But for myself, it was a lot easier myself going in than to let my son go in. That was the hardest thing I ever did, was letting my son go into the service. I would have rather have gone myself.

I'm not supposed to be doing this. [Laughs.]

SB: No, that's okay.

RS: My dad was a veteran too. He didn't see any combat either. Having my oldest brother be in Vietnam and then I decided to go to, I think that was pretty hard on them. My brother, my older brother, had gotten out in 1970 in the fall or the winter of that year. He was there when I left. He was there for my mom and dad too. That was very good. The morning before I left for Okinawa, he and I went for a long walk. [Sniffing.] I didn't think this would bring up these kind of emotions in me.

I had it good on Okinawa. I was a radio operator there, drove Jeeps. My main job there was, we would go down to the port when the ship came in and then make sure there were enough trucks available to...I was part of a motor transport unit. We had to make sure there were enough trucks coming to unload the ship. That was my main job there. That was pretty easy.

SB: Did you enjoy it?

RS: Yes, I did. We had one scary moment there. I was on guard duty around the armory and we were given five rounds of ammunition. The guy before me – we did four hour shifts, I had the midnight to four shift – the guy before me had gotten a Dear John<sup>2</sup> letter from his wife. He went out and hid in some bush and started shooting at people. They said they had gotten him so all of us guys went back in the barracks again. All of a sudden more shots rang out. Then they finally said they got the guy later on. But then I had to go on guard duty around that same barracks or armory that he was guarding. I was just scared to death. Had they really gotten him the second time, you know? For the guys that were in combat, I really don't know how they do it, did it.

SB: Did you interact a lot with guys that had come back from Vietnam?

RS: Not a whole lot. I was one of the younger ones. Some of the guys who were doing our training and stuff had been there. They had a lot of different attitudes. I always enjoyed being around them and learning from them.

SB: I had another question for you. Let's see if I can find it. As you spent time in Okinawa and you interacted with guys that had been there and guys that hadn't and all the things that happened to you, did your opinions change about the war?

RS: I don't know. Maybe a little bit. War is a terrible thing. When you're young and just coming out of high school, you really don't think about what war really is. But I think if we're going to go to war – and I still feel this today – you better realize that you're going to have to kill a lot of people if you want to win. I read an article from *Reader's Digest* many years after the war was over, and it said at one point we could have, I don't know if North Vietnam had like 15, 17 airplanes in their total fleet of military, and we could have totally annihilated, totally destroyed them. But we didn't, and then the war went on, long enough to the point where, I think it was China that finally gave them a bunch of air power. I guess if you're going to send people into war, let them do what they're supposed to do, as sad as that is. If you're not going to go in, my feeling is, if you're not going to go in to war to win, then don't go in to war.

SB: So while you were in Okinawa was there a sentiment among the guys you were with as to our commanders on the ground know more and know better things than the commanders in the Pentagon who are making the decisions?

RS: Yes, I think a lot of times that would be the case.

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<sup>2</sup> A Dear John Letter is a one written to a husband or boyfriend by his wife or girlfriend, telling him that their relationship is over. It was common that soldiers got these letters in the mail when they were in Vietnam.

SB: Did you guys get a lot of news from Vietnam, like did you know at all what was happening or what was going on?

RS: Not a whole lot. Our lives were basically filled with military stuff. On your time off, you sort of tried to get away from that a little bit.

SB: Sure.

RS: Did a lot of playing basketball, running, that sort of thing, lifting weights.

SB: Did you write home a lot?

RS: I don't remember. [Laughs] I think I probably did, maybe once a week. But you know my mom was a lot more faithful in writing me than I was probably in her. I don't think I ever called. Didn't have cell phones, Skype<sup>3</sup>, all that stuff like they do now. One of the reasons I didn't was I thought I would just cry anyway.

SB: Were you homesick then?

RS: Sure, at times. My brother got married – my second oldest brother – got married and asked me if I'd come home, be part of the wedding, be his best man. But I said I didn't think I could do because I didn't think I could go back if I came home. That's why I really feel bad about these guys now that are having to do two to three to four term, tours of duty, that they can go through those goodbyes every time. I just didn't have that in me.

SB: Were you glad that you stayed? Your assignment was to stay on Okinawa. Or did you wish you had gone to Vietnam and had seen combat?

RS: Oh, I don't know if anybody ever wishes they had seen combat. I did have a pretty good buddy that was sort of gung-ho, and he was one of the guys that actually got shot when that one guy went off in the woods. He was...I don't think you really know how you're going to react to combat until you get there. I was sort of, I was a fighter, that was one of the reasons I joined the Marines. I guess that if somebody started shooting at me, I'd probably get pretty mad and would react in a proper way. When you're stationed here in the United States, you've got to do a lot of the military stuff which I wasn't really too crazy about. I was just glad to stay in Okinawa over that 15 months and my tour. But I don't know if I really wanted to go to Vietnam. I wasn't afraid of it really. When I went over to Okinawa, I really expected to end up there, in Vietnam. That's just the way it worked out.

SB: When you returned home, you were flown back home?

RS: Yes.

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<sup>3</sup> An online video chat service.

SB: What was the plane ride like?

RS: You're anxious to get home. I had about five days that I'd be in California yet before I got discharged. We flew on the way over there we flew to Hawaii, then Guam, then Okinawa, and we did the same thing in reverse on the way back. And then I had a sister in the Cities<sup>4</sup> and my mom and dad didn't know exactly when I'd be home. I flew into the Cities and my sister picked me up. She brought me home and surprised Mom and Dad. And Dad was out in the barn milking cows. It was good to be home.

SB: Who saw you first, your mom or your dad?

RS: I went into the house first to see my mom. I knew I'd stay out in the barn when I got home...until the chores were done. That was always my life's ambition, to be a farmer. God had other plans, I guess.

SB: Have you visited the Vietnam Memorial in D.C.?

RS: I have not. They had a replica that went around the country, and we did visit that in Sioux Falls. It's interesting, people are so scared of combat, but I think I had...There were two twins from Omaha, Nebraska, that I went to basic training with. My senior year of high school I had ruptured my kidneys playing football. For some reason, I just totally destroyed my muscle function in my stomach area. I didn't realize it, so when I got to basic training, we had to do sit-ups. And those guys were wrestlers, so they were pumping out, I think they did about 100 sit-ups in two minutes. I barely got out 25. But I think both of those twins died in car accidents after they got out of the service. I know more Vietnam era veterans that died in car accidents than I do that actually died in Vietnam.

SB: Were those car accidents just normal accidents, or were there other...

RS: I really don't know. I just happened to see it. I don't know if I caught it in the newspaper or what it was.

SB: Another question. Sorry, I'm kind of circling back to Okinawa again. Was there drugs, alcohol where you were stationed? Was that prevalent, or was it fairly disciplined?

RS: I didn't see a lot of problem with drugs. Of course, I wasn't real familiar with but I did learn what the smell of marijuana was when I was over there. That's a very pungent smell. It just sort of stuck with me. I think that's the only drug...I have never used myself, but I'm familiar with the smell. Guys told me what it was. Alcohol was a little bit of a problem. I don't think it was any more of a problem than any other part of the service. When I was going through basic training we had a drill instructor that came to work drunk every morning. He'd do our running for us so that's how he got rid of it out of his system. [Laughs.]

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<sup>4</sup> Short for the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) in Minnesota.

SB: That's funny. Do you have any kind of closing thoughts about your experience or war in general?

RS: I think what probably started during Vietnam and not going into war with the right idea, at that point already, probably people are more worried about their political lives than actually doing what's right. I think that's probably gotten even worse than it was during Vietnam. I really feel bad for our military now. It's gotten so politically correct or I don't know what it is.

I think the military is a good experience, makes a lot of kids grow up. But I feel bad that it's gotten to where it is today. But then the same thing is true for our whole country. I feel sad where we are today too. I think there's so much...I read a book on Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>5</sup> and what Hitler was like. The regulations that just kept on flowing, new and new regulations, I just see us getting to that same point. I could give you examples of that, but that doesn't need to be part of this.

SB: Thank you so much.

RS: You're welcome.

SB: I really appreciate it.

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<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a German, was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who opposed Nazism. He was hanged in 1945 for his participation in the resistance movement.

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