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Schelling, Bob

James Bierly

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Narrator's name: Bob Schelling
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Place of interview:
Interviewer's name: James Bierly
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JB: So, okay we are here with Bob Schelling who worked as a...

BS: Actually a weapons repair man on machine guns and the helicopters that we used.

JB: What years were you there?

BS: September sixty... Well, let's see, in Vietnam I was in '66, almost all of '66.

JB: Oh, okay, so you are pretty early.

BS: Yes, almost the very first ones. There were probably people there a year ahead of us I suppose. Actually, I'm guessing more than that, advisors and stuff, you know. But the military body didn't get involved until '65 maybe or so, '64.

JB: Where did you grow up? Were you from this area?

BS: Yes, about 15 miles west from here, Ireton.

JB: Were your parents farmers?

BS: They were; they were off the farm by that time. They were retired. I was the youngest in the family so they were pretty much retired by the time I went to the service. My dad still sold seed corn and did a few things just to make a few bucks, but he was pretty much retired.

JB: Did you have any friends from high school or anything who went there too?

BS: I never went to high school, only about one year in 9th grade. I knew more than the teacher so I quit. [Laughs]

JB: What did you do then after?

BS: Then I went to work for farmers in that area for a little bit; actually until I got drafted into the service, which would have been '64.

JB: Did you know anybody else who went over? Where you the only one from here?

BS: I was the only one who actually ended up in Vietnam. My cousin got drafted the same time as I did, he ended up in France and there was another kid from Hull, as a matter of fact. I don't even know where he spent all his time, I think in Texas maybe or something.

JB: So your cousin was just in France the whole time?

BS: Yes, pretty much. He was a medic there. I moved around, I only actually spent about 9 months in Vietnam, 9 ½ about. Then my time was up so they let me go. I didn't say anything; I let them.

JB: Had you met your wife already before then?

BS: No, not until after I got back.

JB: How did you feel when they told you that your number was up?

BS: Not a whole lot you can do about it but go.

JB: Makes sense. Did you have to get more specialized training to do the helicopter thing?

BS: No, as a matter of fact, I went to school in Aberdeen, Maryland to be a weapons repairman on tanks and then I ended up in Kansas after that. We had tanks there but they didn't need a lot of tanks in Vietnam but the weapons were a lot the same on the helicopters, so they kind of, actually there were even smaller weapons on the helicopters so I didn't need any more training or anything.

JB: Is this where you worked there? Where were you deployed in Vietnam?

BS: When I first got there I was in Vung Tau¹. Not sure if I can even find it on here. She was looking for the map that we had but...let's see where is Saigon on there. [Looking at a map.] Here's Saigon. I was near here, near [inaudible 4:23]. I was right close to there we were out in a pretty remote area. It was 18 miles north of Saigon. And then later on I ended up in Vung Tau.

JB: Okay, right on the coast.

BS: That was ideal because that was an R&R² center.

JB: Nice.

BS: You could go to town every night.

JB: That's fun.

BS: That was almost like a resort area but that was only for the last couple months, 3 months I was there maybe.

¹ A Vietnamese city in the Dong Nai province, near the Nui Lon and Nui Nho mountains.

² Military acronym for rest and recuperation or rest and recreation.

JB: So what were some the things you would do on R&R there?

BS: In Vung Tau you were pretty much free to roam as you wanted to. Go into town, that was pretty safe because they could guard that pretty easy, being that it was on the coast, they just put people around the outside edge. They never had any activity there.

JB: That was a good way to end it.

BS: Mmm hmm.

JB: Yes, definitely.

BS: Yes, it was nice.

JB: The place where you were originally at, thought, were you ever attacked there?

BS: Well, we took small arms fire every night. It was just a natural thing you got used to machine guns going, you know, because they just kept going and going and going. But we had a small village probably, I suppose, a mile from us maybe – no, it wouldn't have been, probably less than a half a mile – then we just took weapons fire there almost every night. They were not allowed to go in and clean out the village because there were a lot of friendly people there.

JB: Oh, really.

BS: But at night bad ones would come in.

JB: Do you know what your units actually did about the village, or did you just live with it because of that?

BS: Yes, see actually we didn't have anything to do with it and so I don't know what they did. They were more after, like, our helicopters. They wanted them out of the air, of course, because they did the most damage to them but they really didn't want us but they weren't always that accurate so a lot of times there were mortars³ they would try to run in.

JB: Did anybody you know ever get hit up there?

BS: In the tent right next to us, there was a kid who got killed but it was by friendly fire. It was our own people shooting across at each other, got confused.

JB: You mean South Vietnamese were shooting?

BS: No, our own troops were shooting.

JB: Oh, American troops.

³ In military science, a short-range artillery piece with a short barrel and low muzzle velocity, firing an explosive projectile in a high-arched trajectory.

- BS: See, we had on all 4 corners machine gun bunkers.
- JB: Was that during the night?
- BS: It was during the night. He was sitting up in his bed; if he had been laying down, he would be fine because they had sand bags about this high so if you were laying down you were fine.
- JB: So the guy up there was turning his gun around to shoot someone behind the camp?
- BS: He thought it was the South Vietnamese shooting at him but it wasn't. It was somebody shooting kiddy-corner across.
- JB: Oh, they just got confused.
- BS: Yes, probably not experienced or whatever. They wouldn't have been people in our company. So I never knew him barely.
- JB: How long did it take for you to get used to getting shot at constantly every night?
- BS: Oh actually it just got to be a common thing, you know, you just heard weapons going all night long. Not very long; you listen to it for a week, it's just a common thing.
- JB: Right, just part of the background noise.
- BS: There was a couple or a young guy from somewhere near Sioux City, I don't even know who he is anymore, but he was going to go home so we were going to go over there one night. And then there was small arms fire that they were shooting right over our head. You could hear the bullets go. Of course you get pretty low right away then, and nobody got hit or anything.
- JB: What did you think of the other people who were with you there?
- BS: You're all family about then, you know. You get to know each other pretty quick, of course, because you don't do anything other than just... We worked big days, we probably put in 16 hour days.
- JB: Yes, definitely.
- BS: Which is good because then it didn't give you time to think about too much else, like going home.
- JB: Well here's a question for you. We've been talking a lot about the music and the movies at the time, and one of the personalities we've been talking a lot about is Jane Fonda⁴. I was wondering what were your thoughts on her at the time.

⁴ In the 1970s and '80s Fonda was active on behalf of left-wing political causes. She was an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War who journeyed to Hanoi in 1972 to denounce the U.S. bombing campaigns there. (Jane Fonda)

BS: See, at that time she probably didn't even come in the picture yet too much. It was a little bit later.

JB: But when you got back.

BS: She wouldn't have been my favorite person, you know, or anybody who ever been there probably. It's pretty easy for somebody like that to get involved and not even know what's going on really.

JB: So what was your take on what was going on in Vietnam? How did you view our purpose there?

BS: At the time I probably didn't think that much of it, you know. The government sent me there so you do what they tell you, you know.

JB: Right.

BS: And hope it's a worthwhile cause, of course. And as it turned out, I'm not so sure it was. It was probably about like what we are in now⁵.

JB: Did you interact a lot with Vietnamese people there or were you mainly just with...?

BS: We had quite a few of them working right on the post, some of them actually worked in the mess hall⁶, in our mess tent, where we ate. Some of them did laundry so you'd talk to them, yes. They were all glad to see you there, of course. And it was a pretty poor country.

JB: Yes.

BS: I never did get way up north where a lot of the activity was even then, you know.

JB: So you didn't see a lot of heavy fighting?

BS: Nope, I was perfectly happy right where I was at.

JB: Yes, sounds like a good place to be, definitely. So how were you greeted when you came home?

BS: Oh, I didn't have any problem with that at all. See, that was all later on, probably about 5 years later maybe.

JB: Yes, that's good, definitely.

BS: And it is kind of bad when they did that because everybody else then was in the same shoes too. They had to be there.

⁵ Mr. Schelling is likely referring to the Iraq War.

⁶ The place where the troops ate meals.

JB: Sure.

BS: A couple couples from town here that just went over there to visit, I think.

JB: Over to Vietnam? Really?

BS: One works for a travel agent and they've never had any connection to Vietnam, I'm sure military wise or anything, but they went last year and that one couple went back again this year. I haven't talked to them. I'd like to talk to them, just to know.

JB: Yes, that would be interesting. Would you ever want to go back?

BS: No, I have no desire to go back. No, but anymore, you know, it gets easier to do that, I suppose, to travel to different kinds of places. It wouldn't be high on my list.

JB: Yes.

BS: I don't know just how much traveling they'd let you do in country either, you know. I'm sure you can't ride around like you can here.

JB: Well, thanks for talking to me about this.

BS: Yes, no problem.

JB: Yes, I appreciate it.

At this point, the interview is over and Mr. Schelling's wife offers to show pictures. The following is the conversation while looking at pictures.

BS: It's a different country than here. This would have been the countryside, what it looked like about.

JB: A lot of tropical plants.

BS: Yep, trees.

JB: Cows.

BS: Water buffalo, yes.

Wife: What are those things you rode in? I couldn't think of the name.

BS: I don't either.

Wife: There are some pictures of you sitting in them.

BS: Lambretta⁷ or something like that.

Wife: Oh yes, Lambrettas.

JB: What's an umbretta?

BS: Lambretta, it's like a... they peddled you around.

Wife: Here, right here

JB: Oh, okay.

Wife: They walked that around, the bike is behind there. Was that your maid?

BS: That was the cleaning gal yes. She would come and clean the tents.

JB: Okay.

Wife: Now this one...you didn't take that though, did you?

BS: That was on our...

JB: Oh what's that, you got a whole bunch of people laying there on the ground.

BS: They are all Vietnamese.

Wife: Lined up, all dead people.

JB: All the people that were killed.

BS: North Vietnamese. They tried to get in our camp one night and they didn't get very far, just inside the gate and the helicopters go up and took them out. Kids, of course, they loved to see you there.

JB: Yes.

Wife: Pick pocket you.

BS: Oh yes, they would take your cigarette lighters, of course at that time I smoked. They'd have your cigarette lighter right out of your pocket in two seconds, you'd never know.

JB: Really? Did you do stuff for the kids like PR⁸ stuff, give them candy?

BS: Oh yes, gum or whatever you had. That's what they wanted.

JB: Right.

⁷ A small, motorized conveyance powered by a gasoline engine and steered like with handle bars much like a motor scooter. The back of the vehicle had bench seats and could hold approximately 15 to 20 persons.

⁸ Public relations.

BS: Of course, then we went over on the ship, some guys flew over but we went over on the ship.

Wife: How many days was that?

BS: Twenty-three days.

Wife: Here's some of the ship, see you have the barracks on the ship.

BS: That's where we slept, yes. We survived. I guess we washed our vehicles by the river because that's where most of the kids always managed to [inaudible 15:55].

JB: Oh, okay.

BS: But we always lived in tents, when we were there until I moved to Vung Tau. Then it was first class. There was a permanent building there.

JB: Nice.

BS: Yes, there's a lot that you'd probably get out of that. That's more of what the countryside looked like.

JB: There's one of your helicopters lined up there.

BS: Yes.

JB: Would you actually go up in the helicopters ever?

BS: I actually did fly quite a bit, I mean I didn't fly it, but I flew with them. They had to have a gunner⁹ every time they went up in the air. Wherever our pilots went, we had a lot of officers, wherever our pilots went they would fly high, because they were going from one place to another. They weren't going down on the ground where you could get shot pretty quick except when you were going up and coming down. So every time I got the chance, I'd volunteer to be a gunner. As long as you could up high enough you'd never take any gunfire or anything.

JB: Did you ever get the chance to shoot anything?

BS: Nope, never did

Wife: You were waiting

BS: Yes. No, I never did.

Wife: You had some metals, rifle metals.

⁹ An air gunner, or a U.S. Air Force soldier assigned to personnel trained to operate flexible guns mounted on aircraft.

BS: Well, just from the training we got. Then we built our own, I think here probably we were building our own building or mess tent where we could eat.

JB: Keeps you busy.

BS: That's what it was all about, work and work and work. You didn't mind it because there was nothing else to do anyway.

JB: Sure.

BS: It was hot.

JB: Yes, really hot.

BS: Here I was probably doing helicopter but we were probably almost done by that time.

JB: Oh yes, there's your gun.

BS: That was the ship on the way over, getting ready to leave, I guess. I haven't looked at a bunch of these myself for a long time until last night I had them out for a little bit. That probably was in the village right by us, I would imagine. They made fish nets and that sort of thing.

JB: Oh, those kids would?

BS: Yes, actually that was probably an elder, I mean a 20 or 30 year old gal.

JB: Really?

BS: Yes she'd be, I think, yes, she'd be an older gal, they don't look old. Those are mostly the choppers we took in, and then you had a gunner on each door on each side. What they like to do is sit underneath as you were coming in, then they'd try and shoot up from the bottom.

JB: Right.

BS: We had one of our officers get shot up through the bottom of the helicopter.

JB: Was he killed?

BS: He didn't get killed instantly, and we never heard of him again so you don't know whatever happened to him. Here's one where they shot out at night from. We had 4 of them, one on each corner of our post. It was pretty small there. This was their sewer system, they just burn it. They were like outdoor toilets with barrels underneath. They would just haul them out and burn them the next day. [Laughs.]

JB: I bet that didn't smell too nice.

BS: Yes, exactly. They did it far enough away so I guess we never smelled it. That must have been in one of the rivers nearby. They had pretty nice looking churches, actually.

JB: Oh yes. Where there a lot of Christians in the area you were at?

BS: You know, I'm not sure what religion...most of them were Buddhist, I think. A lot of the Vietnamese were, weren't they?

JB: Yes.

BS: But we seldom got into any big town.

JB: Right.

BS: There's a gal working on a fishing net.

JB: So were the churches mainly there for foreigners and the French and stuff?

BS: I don't... you see, like in Saigon there would have been a lot of churches, I'm sure. In the little area we were, there were none. We had chaplains, of course, in the service.

JB: Right.

BS: There was an R&R center, which is a pretty good size building.

JB: What all did they have in there?

BS: Well, there wasn't a lot there; you could play pool, table tennis. I actually wasn't in there probably only twice, right in that thing there. Wouldn't have been a swimming pool or anything like that.

JB: Right.

Wife: How about some of the prices, what was that? Cigarettes, what did you pay for your cigarettes?

BS: Oh, 10 cents a pack. [Laughs.] Beer was a dime. Here's one that's kind of like where we live. All tents, of course, when we first got there. Not a lot else in there, I don't think. That was the company I was in. There were a bunch of helicopters going. Wet and rainy, a lot of times it would rain. Every day it would rain about the same time.

JB: What time was that?

BS: Usually about 3:30, 4:00 in the afternoon.

JB: So you came to expect it.

BS: Yes, and it would just pour. Then an hour later the sun would be out and the humidity would be about 100%. That was during the one season, you know.

JB: Right.

BS: Yes, it was a fun experience actually.

JB: Really?

BS: I didn't mind it at all.

JB: That's interesting. So would you do it again?

BS: No, probably not.

JB: Not that good of an experience.

BS: No, but I mean once it was all over with, it was a good experience.

JB: You got to see some of the world.

BS: Yes, the whole military actually was a good experience. You learned a lot in there actually.

JB: What were some of the things you think you learned from the military that you still have as part of your life now?

BS: I don't know about now so much anymore, but we learned discipline definitely, which I don't understand how that works today but I suppose the young people that go in probably still feel the same way, that they have to listen because otherwise they wouldn't stay in there very long.

JB: Yeah.

BS: You got to do what you are ordered to do.

JB: Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

BS: Yes, no problem. Thanks for coming.

JB: Yes, no problem. That was pretty interesting.

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