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## Zeilenga, Art

Sarah Bartz

*Northwestern College - Orange City*

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Narrator's name: Art Zeilenga  
Length of interview: 23:14  
Date of interview: 6/6/2012  
Place of interview: Sioux Center, Iowa  
Interviewer's name: Sarah Bartz  
For: Northwestern College, History 351: America and the Vietnam War

SB: This is Sarah Bartz with Art Zeilenga in his home in Sioux Center on June 6, 2012. Okay, Art. So to start can we talk about where you grew up and kind of what growing up was for you?

AZ: I grew up in Chicago. Roseland actually, it was a Dutch community, on the far south side in Chicago and went to Christian school. Christian grade school until ninth grade. Graduated from there. Then went to high school for 3 years and then did some work downtown Chicago after that until I was drafted. And basically just, you know, do – did a lot of sports when I was younger... baseball and things like that. Normal growing up.

SB: Okay. Did any of your family members ever serve in the military?

AZ: As far as uncles and them?

SB: Yes.

AZ: Yes.

SB: You had World War II?

AZ: World War II. A couple of uncles.

SB: So when you were drafted, what were your feelings about that?

AZ: I kind of was looking forward to it. It was another new experience and a challenged. And of course you always have fears out there and so forth. But, I think I was ready for it. I was working in downtown Chicago at that time at a building and then I didn't know exactly where to go with it or so. So I thought that now's the time to venture out.

SB: And how old were you when you were drafted?

AZ: I was exactly 21 when I was – the day of my birthday. June 13<sup>th</sup>. When I was 21 my draft papers were in the mail. And then by July 20<sup>th</sup>, the next month I was being taken down to Fort Knox, Kentucky.

SB: What year was this?

AZ: This was in 1965... And actually my brother and I were twin brothers. He was drafted at the same time. And then some friends from the local neighborhood were drafted. We all went down by train, down to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic.

SB: And were you all placed in the same training unit?

AZ: Training unit? Yes. The same basic unit down there and... yes, the basic training down there.

SB: How was that being in the South? Coming from Chicago?

AZ: Actually, we were pretty well on the hot – Fort Knox – pretty well all the time. So we didn't get off the base or so. There was just – Basic training and sleep.

SB: How was basic training for you?

AZ: It was interesting... It was challenging. I enjoyed it. It was physical. Did my KP<sup>1</sup>. Hid from bullies.

SB: [Laughs]

AZ: But. I enjoyed the combat training and the rifle training and different things like that. Kind of camaraderie we all had together. But, I didn't find it too bad of an experience really at all.

SB: So then, after basic training, you were with the Army?

AZ: Well, most of the guys either went airborne or were – went to 'Nam. When we got our papers on that last day in basic training. And then because I had -- well I was office experienced – they thought that I had typing experience – but I didn't have typing experience!

SB: [Laughs]

AZ: So they sent, actually my brother and I, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at a Nike Herc<sup>2</sup> headquarters site. And after a day or two, explaining to them that we worked at an office in [inaudible 4:08] and things like that but we didn't know typing. This is not the field we want to get into. So then they sent us down to Montrose Beach in North Chicago at a Nike Hercs site there. And that's where I – we stayed.

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<sup>1</sup> Acronym for either kitchen police or kitchen patrol, referring to duty doing chores in the mess hall. (Glossary of Military Terms & Slang from the Vietnam War)

<sup>2</sup> The Nike Missile Project provided two types of missiles; Art Zeilenga worked with the Nike Hercules (which he nicknames "Nike Herc"). Nike Hercules were commissioned in 1958. These missiles could have had nuclear warheads or conventional explosives, but Zeilenga does not discuss this. (Thelen)

We were in the engineering section. We were in charge of... generators – diesel generators – that transferred the power from AC to DC to raise missile launchers and so forth like that for the Nike Hercs. Then that's where we – that's where I stayed the next two years.

SB: Any... stories or incidents that you remember from that time?

AZ: Well there—we were in a park area on Montrose Beach and we were always well aware that the war was not a favorite war; in fact I still call it a conflict rather than a war. It wasn't a declared war. And there was demonstrators and demonstrations outside the gates and in the park area. We were always told to go by two-by-twos or else in a group, never go out alone. And some of the discouraging things was just seeing the acts of demonstrations and yelling at us from the demonstrators out in front of the gate and so forth like that.

SB: Were there ever any violent kind of...

AZ: No

SB: Occurrences?

AZ: No. Nobody threw – that I can remember – threw rocks at us or anything. It was just basic demonstration.

SB: Okay. Now you mention you call it the Vietnam Conflict? During that time, is that how you thought of it as well?

AZ: Yes. It wasn't a declared war. It was a conflict and that's the way it still is in my mind too. We knew – I knew—we were there for a reason and if I was called to go there I would have gone there, but I didn't and I wasn't called upon to go there. So that's kind of the way we looked at it and we were more concerned with the national protection of the area and we'd go through drills with raising the missiles and so forth like that. We were always prepared. That was our job and we pretty well kept our lines on that. Not necessarily– we didn't hear – not much news about what was going on over at Nam or anything like that, although we knew a lot of casualties and things like that, but our – we were always drilled and kept aware what's going on at the base.

SB: So you were in with the base for two years? And your brother was for that same time as well?

AZ: Yes.

SB: And then after that what did you do?

AZ: We got out and... then actually I and my brother went to a trade school, learned refrigeration, air conditioning, and heating. And that was for a year and then we got a job together again as – at Menards. [inaudible 7:43] refrigeration and heating. And then we served, actually Dell Farm Food stores etc., in the ghetto area in Chicago and he stayed with

them and I didn't – by that time a year or two of that I decided, no I wanted to go on to college and do something different with my life. So that's when we kind of separated and he stayed with that organization and then I came out here to Iowa.

SB: And what year was that, that you started coming to Northwestern?

AZ: That would have been in ... 1970.

SB: Okay... So that would have been around the same time as the Kent State shootings<sup>3</sup>. Was – on Northwestern's campus was there anti-war sentiment?

AZ: [Long Pause] Maybe a little bit but I can't say I or any of the friends that we hung around were into that kind of [inaudible 8:47] and so. I wasn't that too aware of it although I knew – I'd heard and read of the Kent State slayings and so forth like that.

SB: Did you have any friends that had also served in the army that were at Northwestern?

AZ: No... Can't recall any.

SB: Did that make you feel... did you feel like that was... that was odd then that you were maybe a little bit older and had been in the army and you know, during the time when there was the conflict that maybe not everyone agreed with?

AZ: I kept pretty well quiet about it. And I was a little older than the incoming freshmen so forth, like that too, but I just wanted to start a whole new life. You know, when I came home from the service, there was no fanfare. There was no thank you, recognition, or anything like that. Of course, no parades or anything. It wasn't a popular war at all. So I put my army clothes and everything away and I wanted to leave that behind me. And so that's when I wanted to come back out here and start a whole new different life and kind of forget about all that and so forth. So only some, probably immediate friends or so knew that I was in the service and so forth.

SB: From back in Chicago, did you have friends that were sent to 'Nam?

AZ: Probably, yes. Some that I hadn't heard from since those days, so who knows what's happened or so.

SB: So, kind of getting back to...

AZ: Actually, I did have one friend where I was held in the service that was a friend and he was a Marine that got injured in Vietnam with friendly fire.

SB: Okay.

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<sup>3</sup> During an anti-war rally at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, National Guard troops fired into the rally. Four students were killed with nine more injured. The University was closed; strikes and demonstrations spread to other campuses. (Richards)

AZ: So, but he's moved away. He's out near Pella area or so forth like that. So, he and I were buddies kind of.

SB: Getting back to the Kent State thing. When you heard about that on Northwestern's campus, what were your thoughts? Were you afraid that would happen on other campuses?

AZ: No. Not at all. No I didn't think too much about how it would affect any of us at Northwestern or so. I don't recall real active – activists that were on campus that really wanted to cause too much commotion or so. I didn't think too much about it.

SB: When the Pentagon Papers<sup>4</sup> came out the next year, what was your reaction to that event?

AZ: [Long Pause] You know, you just kind of shake your head and you think – I don't know. You know, who do you trust anymore? Who do you believe even to this day? Some of the things on the news and TV and propaganda and so forth. And I kind of – I was just more concerned with my life at that time and what I wanted to pursue and finding a woman – a girl – to marry. My life was going a whole different direction. I didn't – I wanted to put all that kind of behind me... I just didn't want to think too much about it.

SB: Okay. Would you say that you... were indifferent about the government or did you care if... if the government was being honest or not with you? Was that something that mattered to you?

AZ: Deep – It did, in a deep sense. I didn't want to again bring that up too much or so. I—even when like at games you do the Pledge of Allegiance or so, I didn't participate in that. I was pretty hard heart about that for quite a few years, where I wondered why I served and why a lot of buddies that I probably would never see again lost their lives because of that conflict. We even to this day, some of the countries that we used to do war with are now our friends, our allies and you think what in the world? Can't we all live in peace or so, you know?

SB: Kind of getting on the subject of peace and war. This would have been before you came to Northwestern, but the My Lai Massacres<sup>5</sup> made public – very shocking at that time. Did you have a strong reaction to that?

AZ: Actually, again not -- again and I'm being [inaudible 14:25] and I blocked a lot of that stuff out and I was more concerned with keeping up my grades and studying and studying and studying and I didn't. Studies didn't go easy for me, so I had to study a lot and so I just was

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<sup>4</sup> The Pentagon Papers consisted of a U.S. Defense Department study that reviewed the American Vietnam policy. Sections of the study was secretly released to the *New York Times* and later the *Washington Post* in mid- 1971. The Justice Department halted the publication on the grounds of national security and the case eventually went to the Supreme Court. The publication was justified under the First Amendment. (Moise)

<sup>5</sup> In 1968, during a sweep for Viet Cong in My Lai, U.S. soldiers massacred approximately 504 Vietnamese civilians. Due to a cover-up by military officials, the number of deaths reported varies significantly. Eventually Ronald Ridenhour brought the cover-up to light with the assistance of Congressman Morris Udall in 1969. Only one soldier involved in the incident was convicted, but later President Nixon released him under grounds of being a scapegoat. (Frame)

pretty well involved with just the college life. And that's the way I wanted it to be too. That's why I say my story may not be that interesting compared to a lot of other vets but...

SB: No, it is interesting though because you were state-side as opposed to over there so you had recollection of when all these things happened. So that's important.

AZ: It really hurt when you – when you're serving your country and you see other fellows outside the gate that are your age or younger that are demonstrating. It really affects you.

SB: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

AZ: You know, name calling and you just – it just hurts when... you see signs and it's like we against them and it shouldn't be that way at all. We're – we were in – I didn't enlist, we were drafted, but you're there for a reason, for a purpose, to – I'm here in case there was an air attack with missiles. To help protect you folks and here you're out there demonstrating for the – because the war and all that, but it hurts.

SB: So, what was your opinion then of guys who would draft dodge or...

AZ: Go to Canada?

SB: Go to Canada, yes.

AZ: I could understand why they would do that. Conscientious objector or just say you know I honestly can't serve. I would respect that. Say, you have to do what you got to do.

SB: So you're drawing a distinction then between the guys that just avoided and the guys that actually actively demonstrated?

AZ: Yes.

SB: So, the demonstrations and the name calling, does that still – does that stay with you?

AZ: Only when I want to bring it up. It remains deep. Any soldier comes back from serving with different wounds, whether it's physical, emotional, psychological, mental. And like those are wounds that you try and suppress and you know, don't like to bring up or think about them too often anymore. That's what way back in the past and forgive and forget really. You try and understand all of that too.

SB: Kind of getting into more popular culture, what was your opinion on Jane Fonda<sup>6</sup> for instance, going over to the... You know...

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<sup>6</sup> American actress and Vietnam sympathizer, Jane Fonda became very outspoken of the Vietnam War. In July 1972 she made 10 propaganda broadcasts in Hanoi denouncing American activity in Vietnam. Her actions gained the contempt of many American people. Although she later apologized for her actions, her Hollywood career was significantly affected. (Welsh)

AZ: The ‘Nam

SB: Yes

AZ: I didn’t agree with that. I thought, what are you doing? I guess she had to do what she had to do, but I just didn’t – I still don’t understand that and I shake my head.

SB: As far as more popular culture goes, did you – do you remember any... any songs from that era that kind of stuck out?

AZ: There was a song from Glen Campbell. Gently on My Mind<sup>7</sup>, or so that I remember that one. I was – we were in basic and we were lonely guys. I kind of remember that one.

SB: Have you ever seen any movies pertaining to Vietnam, like *Platoons* or *Deer Hunter*<sup>9</sup> or?

AZ: No

SB: No?

AZ: No, and maybe I purposely stayed away from that too.

SB: That makes sense. Have you ever been to the Vietnam Memorial?

AZ: Yes. That one and when the visiting one came into town, but...that’s emotional. That – You go and you rub your fingers on some of the guys you knew from basic or whatever. That’s... that’s reality. That’s tough one. Yes, I would go again and honor them. Lot of guys – lot of names – lot of names.

SB: Did you go alone or did you bring your wife with you?

AZ: Yes, they were there, but I was – they were there but I was really by myself at the wall. You just think a lot about a lot of different things. Could have been you or whatever, you know.

SB: If you were given the opportunity, would you go to Vietnam?

AZ: No, I don’t know if I would. No, I don’t think so.... Haven’t thought about it but I don’t think I would.

SB: Any reasons or just...

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<sup>7</sup> Zeilenga is referring to the song “Gentle on My Mind” sung by Glen Campbell. Campbell became famous in the mid-1960s for country music with a pop twist. (Frentner)

<sup>8</sup> *Platoon* came out in 1986. A young America volunteers for Vietnam, but upon arrival he discovers he is not taken seriously by other soldiers because of his inexperience. An illegal killing during a village raid causes conflict between members of the platoon. (Sheen)

<sup>9</sup> *Deer Hunter* was released in 1978. It follows the lives of three young men that served in Vietnam and survived a Viet Cong prison camp and how the experience affects their lives after the war. (De Niro and Walken)

AZ: No, I don't know. I never thought of that or was asked that. No, I don't know... if I would or not. I'd probably say no.

SB: Okay.

AZ: There's again, there's a part of me that just wants to... put that down deep where it – not to think about it too much.

SB: So then, agreeing to do this interview, was that something you were a little apprehensive about?

AZ: A little bit, yes. I think it would be for anyone that's served or especially went over to Nam or so. There – any vet you talk to, you know, they – there's certain things that are just down deep that you don't want to bring up or it's hard to bring up. You probably find some emotion or emotional in everyone that you interview. We're all affected some way or another.

SB: Yes. For you does it help to talk about it?

AZ: No... Yes and no. I don't know.

SB: Did you have any closing thoughts or anything we maybe didn't touch?

AZ: Not that I can think of. There again, I think I don't know what you really got out of the interview, but looking back I can see God's hand in my life. Where he protected me from working in an office before I got drafted, to them placing me in... what they thought would be an office situation instead of sending me to Nam. And then staying state-side. And then working – you know, looking back, you kind of see God's plan in your life with all that.

SB: Well thank you so much for sharing. I really appreciate it.

AZ: Quite all right.

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