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Van Essen, Harold

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Narrator's name: Harold Van Essen

Length of interview: 27:17

Date of interview: June 4, 2012

Place of interview: Van Essen home, Rock Valley, IA

Interviewer's name: Sarah Bartz

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

SB: So, Harold, can we start off by talking about where you grew up and what life was like?

HV: I grew up near Inwood on a farm...Just did farm work. Went through high school, didn't do nothing out of the ordinary, I guess.

SB: Had any of your family members been in the service?

HV: Yes, my dad was.

SB: In World War II?

HV: Yes, during World War II. He never had to go overseas; his main station point was in Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan¹ – guarded the locks and dams system there. That's all I remember that he did. And he was in the Army.

SB: So, how old were you when the Vietnam War started?

HV: When it started? Oh, boy...let's see...

SB: Or how old were you when you went into the service?

HV: I was 18 when I enlisted.

SB: You enlisted? Why did you enlist?

HV: Well, because my brother-in-law that's here now – he's going to talk to you – he was in the Army, and he was telling me, if your draft number is close, don't wait to get drafted because you don't want to be in the Infantry. You don't want to be in the Army. And so I enlisted in the Navy, tried to avoid going to Vietnam, you know.

¹ The Soo Locks located in Sault Ste. Marie connected Lake Superior to Lake Huron, and they were used as a passageway through which 90% of the nation's iron ore was shipped in World War II. People feared the Locks would be targeted by the Germans, so military presence in Sault Ste. Marie increased throughout the war (Noble).

Because my number was like in the 60s², so it was almost a sure thing that I was going to get drafted. And so I just decided to enlist.

SB: So you were in the Navy and you were a Seabee?³

HV: Yes!

SB: Can you tell me a little bit about that, about basic training and kind of how you got to become a Seabee?

HV: Yeah, I went through basic training, which everybody pretty much does the same thing in basic training. Then they give you a choice on what you wanted to do, and I chose to go into construction. I always liked working with wood and building, doing that kind of stuff. As a farm kid growing up, I liked to tinker with that kind of stuff. And I thought, well, that would be good stuff to have later on, as you grow up or whatever, and so I volunteered to be a builder, part of the Seabees. And they had all different things you could've went into, you know – heavy construction, equipment, all that. Seabees has all that different kind of construction thing. But I went into doing a builder, and I went to builder school after I got out of boot camp. Went into builder school, and that was in Port Hueneme, California. I don't even know if that's there anymore, but...Went through that, and after that, I got orders that in about four months we'd be going to Vietnam, so then we had to go through pre-combat training, which was in Coronado Island⁴ – it's south of San Diego, there. So we did that, and then we ended up going to Vietnam.

SB: During basic training, did you ever experience or see any sort of tension between, say, the superiors and subordinates, or even racial tensions between any of the guys?

HV: No, I don't think. Not racial things, I don't think that I saw. Of course, when you were going through boot camp, everybody's scared of the officers, that's just the way it works. It was real good for me because I was pretty...I didn't have a lot of respect for a lot of people. I was young, ornery, whatever you want to call them, what the right word would be, but liked to get into trouble, kind of. Not real big trouble, but just out and about, you know – one of them kind of deals. I wasn't scared to challenge somebody or do something like that. If they said, well, let's go out and go do this, I would go along with them. And that was just who I was. And when I got into boot camp, they taught me a lot about respect – respecting other people and respecting other people's things. And it was good for me, it really was, the whole service thing was good for me.

² The draft lottery was based on birth dates, with 366 capsules containing the birth dates of young men (including February 29) in a container that were drawn by hand and assigned a number starting with 001. Men with lower numbers were called first, so a number in the 60s would have been called (Valentine).

³ Seabee is the nickname for the United States Construction Battalions.

⁴ Coronado Island is located across the San Diego Bay from downtown San Diego and is actually a peninsula connected to the mainland by a strip of land (“Coronado, California”).

SB: Would you say you enjoyed it?

HV: A lot of it, I did. I didn't enjoy everything. The boot camp was tough, you know. But that's because you have to respect others, you have to do what other people tell you to do...And that kind of went against your will, but that's part of taking young men and make them who they are today. That's my feel any how...

SB: So you were in the Navy and you were stationed in...Da Nang⁵?

HV: Yes.

SB: And how long, and over what time period were you there?

HV: I think I wrote that down...I was there for 11 months. Got out in June of 1970, so whatever 11 months back from that would be...had to be like July, I went over there, I think.

SB: And then while you were in Vietnam, what kind of projects did you work on, as a builder?

HV: I think the first one I remember doing was a big radar site on top of a mountain that overlooked Da Nang. It's up on top of what they call Monkey Mountain⁶, and it was a really cool mountain. It was full of monkeys! I mean, those monkeys would fly up in the tree all over. But up on top, we had to make a huge radar site where they would detect incoming rockets. And what we did was, we poured concrete walls and stuff like that, and then put a big bubble on top of it, and that radar thing sat inside of it.

So I was involved with that for a number of months, and then we built a cement block plant so that we could build blocks for the homes for Vietnamese people. We built that cement plant, and that was one of the things I remember...we built it, but the actual machine had to come from the United States. And when that got shipped in, we set it down in its place, and two days after we had it going, it kept blowing up. [Laughs] That was very disheartening. I mean, you go through all the work of making it. First we were just making cement blocks by hand, but then this machine come and we thought, boy, now we can really put out cement blocks, and it kept blowing up. And we think it was an inside job...I don't know a lot, but some of the people were Vietnamese people during the day, helping us, and they turned out to be what they call Viet Cong at night. And I got to believe that they knew exactly where that block plant was at because they just blew it right up.

⁵ Da Nang was the second-largest city in South Vietnam with a 1967 population of 143,910, and it was the headquarters of the South Vietnamese Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). It also contained a major US military base and port during the Vietnam War (Campbell).

⁶ The Son Trà Mountain east of Da Nang held a US Air Force and Marine base and was known as Monkey Mountain ("Monkey Mountain").

And I did that, and then for about 2, 2 ½ months, I maintained a pier which was right in Da Nang area, too, where they unloaded big ships. And my job was to be sure all the planking stayed down, and we had to keep paint on the lift arms, and all that kind of stuff.

SB: So while you were working, did you stay with the same group of people?

HV: As far as the military people? Yes.

SB: So did you guys get to all be pretty close then?

HV: Yes, we did. We would gather in the morning in our public works apartment, they called it, and we would gather there, then get sent out to different areas. And then when we'd get there, the people that were assigned to work with us – the Vietnamese people. Like when I did the pier, I probably had six Vietnamese civilians working with me to help do the work, basically. And everybody kind of got that way out of the public works department – they'd have so many Vietnamese help them just to spread out the work load and try and get done faster, I guess. I'm not real sure what their system was – we just did what we were told.

SB: Sure. So did you have a good experience working with the Vietnamese people?

HV: I did. Yeah, I didn't mind them. It was a big culture shock to me when I got over there because when we were kids growing up, we very seldom went on a vacation, and so I never really got to see any different parts of the United States. And the furthest I ever went away was Minneapolis and that was when I was like probably 10 or 12, something like that. And so when I got over there, it was a big culture shock. For one thing, when we got off the plane, they put you in a big old truck-bus type thing, and all these guys take off, and being a farm kid, you're just not used to that many people. Anyway, they shipped us to Camp Tien Sha⁷, where we were based out of, and going down the road, it was probably 5 or 5:30 in the morning when our plane landed in Da Nang, and so the sun was just starting to come up, and you're going down the road and you see these people going out in the field, just going to the bathroom. And I'm thinking, where are we?! This is really backwards. And you see the civilian people working out in the rice paddies and stuff like that, and it's all done by hand...My thoughts were when I first saw that – man, these people are 50 years behind us! Or maybe even 80 years behind us, the way it looked. But that was just something I had to work through in my own mind.

SB: Let's see...Did you or your unit ever work in a combat or combat-support thing?

HV: No. We never got into any of that. We were just basically there to build things, clean things up.

⁷ Located at the base of Monkey Mountain, Camp Tien Sha was a US Navy base (Harms).

SB: So, with the explosion at the concrete block plant, you saw the aftereffects of things being blown up and stuff. Did you ever have an experience where you had to constantly be rebuilding the same thing?

HV: Yes, we went back and rebuilt that. Yeah, we did. We went back and rebuilt it, but the time I left the block plant, the block machine was not back there yet. But I was there during when Nixon started pulling people out⁸ already. So I don't know how that turned out as far as whether they kept going with that or what.

SB: Were there other projects that you were involved in that got destroyed and you had to rebuild as well?

HV: No – well, our public works – and I never really got involved with it, but my guys that were in my unit, some of them got assigned to just pour concrete at the runways, and they'd go back almost daily. You know, where the big jets would drop all these guys in, coming from the United States. That would get blown up almost daily. It was one of them things where they just wanted to irritate you, you know. Aggravate you, irritate you, I don't know what you call it.⁹

SB: Can you describe for me some of the more memorable moments that you still carry with you from that time?

HV: Well, I guess, the big thing, as I grow up – or get older, yeah I'm done growing up – but as I get older, some of the things that stick in my mind is why does – and this probably doesn't pertain to this at all – but why does God treat people so much differently? Why do them people get in the warzone, and we have it made here? That was my thoughts. And that's what sticks with me. And I don't know about real memories – yeah, I think about these different things all the time. And if I didn't have a family here, I would probably try and go back there to see how much it changed just because it was part of my life. Yeah, just out of curiosity to know what happened to the stuff that we did work on. What happened to it? When our government decided to pull out of there, everything that was there, it just stayed there. And that was a lot of dollars, and that bothered me. But that's part of war, I think. They can't take that stuff back – it costs too much.

SB: So when you and the guys in your unit were off duty – I'm assuming you got breaks and things like that – what did you guys do for fun? I mean, a lot of history books emphasize that there was a lot of almost constant beer drinking, smoking all sorts of drugs, especially if you're in a major city, then there's more things that go on. Did you ever see any of that?

⁸ In a December 1969 speech, President Nixon said the Vietnam War was ending and that he had already ordered the withdrawal of 60,000 US troops. Although he continued to decrease the number of American troops fighting, the war continued (History.com).

⁹ Blowing up runways was probably not just for irritation but part of military strategy so the enemy could not land planes with new troops.

HV: Oh, yes. There was a lot of alcohol, a lot of drugs – *lot* of drugs. When we had some time off, I guess I was more just into just beer, which was bad enough. And we would have parties on the beaches, grill steaks and drink beer. Yeah, it was entertainment! Get rid of some of the pressure, you know, think about something different. We had some guys in our group that did hard drugs. One of the guys got caught and got dishonorable discharge because he did not want to partake in anything. He didn't want to work, so he went into a bunker and said, I'm just going to get stoned, and if they catch me, they catch me. And they caught him! And he got booted out.

One of my best friends smoked marijuana all the time. It was just part of his life, and he wanted me to try it too, and didn't want no part of it. I knew alcohol was probably bad enough for me; I didn't need marijuana. Yeah, like you say, it was just part of the life over there.

SB: Did that bother you?

HV: It does now, if I look back on it. At the time, no, because I had the attitude, after I was there for a while, I didn't care. If my life would have been taken over there, that was my attitude – I didn't care. And I think that was a lot of the guys' attitude.

SB: Why do you think that was?

HV: I don't know, I guess we were hearing things that people in the United States just didn't care what was going on. They didn't care that we were over there. From the information that we got, it was kind of a political war. A lot of money involved, where people were making big money on that war – they didn't want it to end! And we all got the impression that, why are we over here fighting for people just so they can make money? We're not trying to win this war; we're just making rich people richer in the States. And that was our big thing.

SB: So, with what you saw, and the culture over there, did you ever hear about incidents – not My Lai,¹⁰ per se, but like My Lai – incidents where guys just lost it?

HV: No. I didn't hear much about that. But we weren't really into the carrying the gun part of it. We never really carried a weapon.

SB: You didn't?

HV: No. If we would go out, like when we'd go out on the beaches, we could take a 45 with us, just in case somebody would come up. But it was pretty secure when we were in Da Nang.

¹⁰ A company of US soldiers brutally killed over 500 women, children, and old men in the village of My Lai in 1968. The US Army covered up the massacre for a year, fueling anti-war sentiment and dividing the United States over the Vietnam War (History.com).

SB: While you were over there, did you learn to speak Vietnamese, since you had access with the people?

HV: No, not really.

SB: How did you guys communicate? Did you have a translator?

HV: Yes, there was some translators. Some of the Vietnamese people knew English pretty well, and we would tell them, and then they would tell the Vietnamese what to do. That's basically the way it worked. We knew some of the slang stuff, the stuff we shouldn't have known, we got to know. But other than that, no, never really learned any Vietnamese.

SB: So, while you were there, were you homesick at all?

HV: No, not really. I think the homesick part for me was when I was in boot camp just because I had never been away from home, and then it was like a big shock when you go away from your family...and I was only 18 years old – I just graduated from high school. Graduated in May, and November I was in the service. Yeah, I was homesick then, but not after that I wasn't.

SB: Did you write home a lot?

HV: No, not really, because of the lack of respect for my parents. And I should have, thinking back on it, because now I have sons that same age. My son, he was 21, you know. That would really be a heartbreaker if you didn't hear from your kids, especially when they were in a war. It would be really tough...But at that time I was young and courageous, or whatever you want to call it, and I just...I had a girlfriend at the time. I probably wrote to her more than I did my parents.

SB: When you got back from Vietnam, had your life changed at all because of that experience?

HV: Yes, I think so. I grew up a lot, and that's what I needed. I needed something to change my life from who I was when I was young. And it did. I looked at life differently. When I was growing up, I went to church but didn't care about church. I went because I had to, because my parents made me. One of the guys that I was over there with, he tried to get me to go to church every Sunday with him. They had church services right on our base, and most of the time, I would go. And it was good for me. For one thing, I switched religions from where I really grew up here and learned that there was something a whole lot better, so that's what I ended up doing. For that part, it was a good experience.

SB: Were there any negative impacts coming back?

HV: No, not really. The whole thing was pretty good. No, not really. I got out on a hardship discharge¹¹ because my dad hurt his back and he couldn't farm, and so I had to come home and help him. And so I wasn't really thinking about getting out, per se, I just had to get home and help my dad, that's just what it was. You know, a lot of people said when they got back, they got spat on and stuff like that. Well, they didn't bother me on that part.

SB: Were your parents proud of your service?

HV: Oh, they sure were, yes...After it was over [laughs].

SB: So having that experience of Vietnam, what is your opinion then of other wars that the US has been involved in? Because some guys come back and they say Vietnam made them anti-war. Would you say that would be the same for you? Or did your opinion on war change at all?

HV: I think the way they fought the Vietnam War was not the way wars are supposed to be fought. I don't know how much you know about it, but before we went over there, during our pre-combat stuff, they said, you will be given orders that you will not shoot anyone unless you've been shot at first. Well, to my way of thinking, that's not the right way to play a war. You know, you just don't do that! I mean, if you see the enemy, shoot the enemy. That's what we're there for. Don't let them try and shoot us first. And so that was a big thing to me. Why would you give an order like that? But that was my big hang-up. It was like they didn't want to win the war. And I don't know enough about it, not like my brother-in-law; he studied it. Maybe it's different than the way I thought, but that's where our group kind of had that impression.

SB: So, after coming back, have you stayed in contact with any of the guys from your unit?

HV: Yes, one of the guys. His name's Brian Schonlank, he's from Sacramento, California. And we were good friends; we went through the Seabee training together, the builder's training together, and then we ended up going to Da Nang and we served in the same outfit together. Every once in a while, he comes out here, and we talk to each other on the phone once in a while.

SB: So, are you involved in any veteran organizations, like the American Legion or anything?

HV: No. No, I never got into that. I don't know why, really, just never did. I think it's good, but no, I never did...

¹¹ A hardship discharge is given when a member of the soldier's immediate family dies or has a long-term disability, and the soldier's leaving the service will alleviate hardship for the family (*Hardship/Dependency Voluntary*).

SB: Are there any closing thoughts you'd like to add that maybe we didn't get to?

HV: No, not really...nothing that I can think of, right off.

SB: Well, awesome! That should cover it, I think.

HV: Yeah, like I said, mine was a pretty simple life when I was over there.

SB: You know, that's maybe a blessing though, too.

HV: Oh, for me it was! Yeah, that's right. I didn't have to get involved in a lot of that stuff. I know of Vietnamese people in the jails that they had there, the stockades, I guess that's what they call them. And we would go visit our guys in the infirmaries that had been shot up, and we'd go visit people there just because of the way we were brought up – you're supposed to pay attention to people that got hurt, and so we'd go in and visit with them people.

SB: Well, thank you.

HV: Sure.

SB: Yeah, it's been great.

HV: Hopefully it does you some good [laughs].

SB: Oh yes. Thank you so much.

HV: No problem!

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