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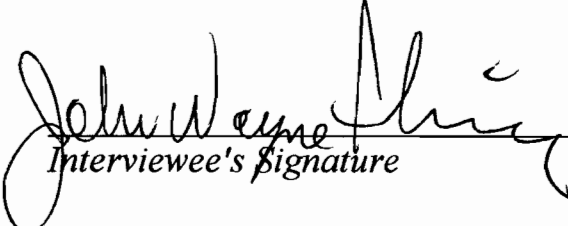
We (I) JOHN WAYNE FLEMING and SHERRYL J. THORNTON  
*Interviewee (print)* *Interviewer (print)*

do hereby grant Jacksonville State University, Oral History Archive, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at:

119 E. 22nd ST. ANNISTON, ALABAMA

on the date(s) of: MARCH 6, 1996

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

  
*Interviewee's Signature*

Date: 3-6-96

Address: 10319 TOWNVIEW

SUGARLAND, TEXAS

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

  
*Interviewer's Signature*

Date: 3-6-96

Address: 119 E. 22nd ST.

ANNISTON, AL. 36201

Phone: 205-238-0773

## Gift and Release Agreement

We (I) BILL FLEMING and SHERRYL J. THORNTON  
*Interviewee (print)* *Interviewer (print)*

do hereby grant Jacksonville State University, Oral History Archive, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at:

119 E. 22nd ST. ANNISTON, AL, 36201

on the date(s) of: MARCH 6, 1996

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Bill Fleming  
*Interviewee's Signature*

Date: 3-6-96

Address: P.O. Bx 1372

LAFERRIA, TEXAS

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Sherryl Thornton  
*Interviewer's Signature*

Date: 3-6-96

Address: 119 E. 22nd St

ANNISTON, AL, 36201

Phone: 205-238-0773

## INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NAME: JOHN WAYNE FLEMING M/F MALE

ADDRESS: 10319 TOWNVIEW SUGARLAND, TEXAS

APPROXIMATE AGE OR DATE OF BIRTH 8-1-1935

MOTHER'S NAME MAYBEL ROBERTA VINSON FLEMING

FATHER'S NAME JOHN FLETCHER FLEMING

BIRTH PLACE: GADSDEN, AL,

EDUCATION 10<sup>th</sup> GRADE/TECH RELIGION \_\_\_\_\_

BUSINESS\*POLITICAL\*SOCIAL MEMBERSHIPS \_\_\_\_\_

PRESENT OCCUPATION BUSINESSMAN

EXPERIENCE/SPECIAL SKILLS ELECTRICIAN/CONTRACTOR

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS LOVING WIFE of 5 CHILDREN

NATIONAL EVENTS INTERVIEWEE HAS PARTICIPATED ERA OF VIETNAM WAR

U.S. CITIZEN? YES NATURALIZED CITIZEN? \_\_\_\_\_

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION \_\_\_\_\_

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## INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NAME: BILL FLEMING M/F MALE

ADDRESS: 1372 LAFERRIA, TEXAS

APPROXIMATE AGE OR DATE OF BIRTH 8-15-1937

MOTHER'S NAME MAYBEL ROBERTA VINSON FLEMING

FATHER'S NAME JOHN FLETCHER FLEMING

BIRTH PLACE: GADSDEN, AL.

EDUCATION 10TH GRADE / TECH RELIGION PENTACOSTAL

BUSINESS\*POLITICAL\*SOCIAL MEMBERSHIPS \_\_\_\_\_

PRESENT OCCUPATION RETIRED BUSINESSMAN

EXPERIENCE/SPECIAL SKILLS JACK OF ALL TRADES

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS \_\_\_\_\_

NATIONAL EVENTS INTERVIEWEE HAS PARTICIPATED \_\_\_\_\_

ERA OF VIETNAM WAR

U.S. CITIZEN? YES NATURALIZED CITIZEN? \_\_\_\_\_

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION \_\_\_\_\_

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# AMERICAN CIVILIANS IN VIETNAM

## Audio Tape

### I. Mr. Bill Fleming

- A. Employment as a truck driver
- B. Expectations/Salary
- C. Experience with Vietnamese people
- D. Bullet through windshield
- E. Opinions of Vietnam War
- F. Tin City
- G. Living quarters
- H. Land/Beach
  - I. Witness of conflict
  - J. ROK marines
- K. Opinion

### II. Mr. Wayne Fleming

- A. Employer
- B. Expectations/Apprehensions
- C. Living quarters
- D. Construction of modular units
- E. Environment
- F. Experience with Vietnamese people
- G. Tin City
- H. ROK marines/Witness
  - J. Graft/Smuggling
- K. Tin City continued
- L. Opinions

Sherryl J. Thornton  
American History  
Oral History Report

Interviewees:  
Bill Fleming  
Wayne Fleming

## AMERICAN CIVILIANS IN VIETNAM

The Vietnam War actually lasted from the mid 1950's until 1975. It began when the French was replaced by seven hundred American advisors in 1956. The incident in the Gulf of Tonkin where an American destroyer was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats on August 2, 1964 was an excuse to justify the escalation of the U.S. effort. President Johnson refrained from informing Congress that the destroyer was involved in a covert operation in North Vietnamese waters.

During the Vietnam era, the United States made a concerted effort to build up American forces. This need included the construction of air bases to support those forces in South Vietnam. The government contracted American corporations to build air bases in designated areas of South Vietnam. These private corporations enlisted the services of American civilians to work for their contracting firms.

In 1966, in three separate intervals, three brothers joined the ranks of the civilian work force in South Vietnam. Presently, all three of these brothers live out of state, but I had a brief opportunity to interview two of these brothers. Mr. Bill Fleming, the first interviewee, was employed as a truck driver. He hauled dirt and gravel for the surfacing of the runway. And

Mr. Wayne Fleming, the second interviewee, was employed as an electrician and general contractor foreman.

The pay scale for this overseas employment was eighteen hundred to two thousand dollars a month, tax free, at the end of an eighteen month term of employment. This was a seductive employment lure in 1966, especially when compared to an average of five hundred and fifty dollars gross salary per month in the United States.

During the flight, feelings of apprehension interrupted their thoughts as they pondered over the conflict that enveloped this foreign country and the vast distance they had traversed, far, far from home. After a long journey of hop-scotching across the Pacific Ocean, the destination was a landing site in Tuey Wah, South Vietnam, an area just north of Cam Ranh Bay. The plane landed on a make-shift runway made of mats draped across an open field. Mr. Bill Fleming's plane had to land on the mats in an enshrouded mist of fog, which must have added to the anxiety of many of the passengers.

The first housing accommodations were tents. Soon after, modular housing facilities were erected. Mr. Wayne Fleming was the first brother to land in South Vietnam. He worked for Walter Kidder Corporation. Mr. Fleming and his crew set up the power plant and began to assemble the first prefabricated modular housing units. The Officer's Club was one of the first structures assembled followed by the Non-Commissioned Officer's Club. Housing for the soldiers assigned to the area were the last to be constructed. Interestingly, these modular units were air conditioned. The food the civilians ate was the same as that of the army. Mr. Wayne Fleming enjoyed the cuisine, ~~of~~ which, included steak.

Many of the local Vietnamese were employed as cooks, maids, laundry workers. These people were also employed in the construction of the more heavy work associated with the building of the runway. The contracting company was required to employ a ratio of twenty percent Nationalists during the duration of the airfield construction. Of all of the Vietnamese employed, about seventy percent were female. It was assumed that all of the Vietnamese employed were poverty stricken peasants.

The culture of the Vietnamese people were very <sup>different from</sup> ~~dis~~similar to those of the American brothers. Hygiene and certain food consumption attributed to the unpleasant odoriferous emanation coming from the bodies of the locals. Mr. Bill Fleming, not familiar with these foreign customs, was at first disgusted with the primitive environment involving Vietnamese diet, eating habits and hygiene, "...You couldn't stand to get within twenty feet when they were eating...They crapped in the streets, right there in front of you."

The main diet of the local people were fish and rice. But as Mr. Wayne Fleming experienced, lizards were not excluded from the menu. "...We killed a large lizard. One of the locals wrapped it in a leaf and buried it in the ground, poking a stick in the ground above it as a marker, so it could be later found and eaten." Apparently, the lizard is considered a delicacy in this part of the world."

The runway was tamped down by hand by the Vietnamese crew employed by the contractor. The Vietnamese would come to work with their lunch, usually consisting of rice and fish, in a metal pail. This meal would lay in the pail during the heat of the day waiting on the signal for lunch to begin.



One can imagine the heaviness of the air when several of the Vietnamese come to work with their lunch pail.

Betel nuts, both red and black are chewed like tobacco by the Vietnamese people, both male and female. The effects of the betel nut imparts a feeling of well being. "...she looked like her mouth was bleeding." Wayne remarked about his first observation of this practice.

My personal research has produced evidence that there is also medicinal qualities of the betel nut. The betel nut aids in digestion, sweetens the breath and strengthens the gums, as well as creating a sense of well being.

The American civilian workers were not allowed to carry weapons or venture beyond the perimeter of the compound unless their job description required them to do so, such as in Mr. Bill Fleming's transport of material. He was required to drive approximately thirty miles to obtain the dirt or gravel needed for the construction project of the runway. He chose to drive at night to avoid the crowds in the narrow roads that were so prevalent in the daylight hours.

Being confined to the immediate area created an unsatisfactory isolation for the American workers. Outside the perimeters was the enticement of 'Tin City', a conglomerate of hovels constructed from corrugated tin that offered American music on a juke box, alcohol, drugs and prostitution. The attainment of the construction materials, juke box and generator to supply the power source, is left to the imagination of the reader. "Vietcong goes over there at night...", as Mr. Bill Fleming tells us. During the day, both American soldiers and American civilians climbed the fence to partake of this forbidden liberty. When I asked about the dangerous risks

associated with 'Tin City', of being shot or the possibility of catching a disease, the question was answered by the greater concern of catching a venereal disease. Mr. Wayne Fleming compared the wide open immoral activity of 'Tin City' to that of Phenix City, Alabama in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Wayne told of being "...elbow to elbow..." with the 'enemy' as they drank at a hovel in 'Tin City' where no one is treated as an enemy. He also expounded upon the drug smuggling committed by soldiers and civilians, and briefly indicated Americans dying at the hands of other Americans involved in such activities. Wayne suggested that 'Tin City' was an empire fueled by greed laden with corruption, including 'kickbacks and graft'.

"You had to be careful of what you drank because the VC would drill little holes in the black market whiskey that the American soldiers would try to buy and plug it with wax after putting poison in it..." Mr. Bill Fleming responded, "...we could buy hot beer at the PX on the base."

Loneliness, isolation and prospects of adventure may have been the catalysts to prompt these men to venture over the fence from time to time.

Many times the North Vietnamese would blockade the road to collect a fee for passage to 'Tin City'. They never offered a threat to the American civilians. They only wanted the toll money. "...they didn't want your life, they wanted your money," uttered Mr. Wayne Fleming who believes that these tolls could have been a financial foundation or contribution to the guerrilla campaign.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the American civilian experience of South Vietnam is the lack of current news or concern about the status of the war effort in Vietnam. The isolationism suffered by the civilians may

have been both containment in their immediate area and a vacuum effect regulating any negative information coming in to the encampment. Most of the news that the brothers had obtained was related by 'word of mouth.' They often replied that they had *heard* about something happening in a particular place. Beyond that, they had to rely on their own personal experiences.

The subject of witnessing the conflict brought first hand information. Mr. Bill Fleming told about many nights when the sky lit up at a distance when the napalm was being dropped, and heard the muffled roars of mortar fire as he drove his dump truck down the narrow lane in route to pick up material. He met gun fire, bursting the windshield onto his lap while he aimed his truck toward the security of the airfield. Mr. Bill Fleming also witnessed the execution of a Vietcong while a photojournalist snapped the picture. A photograph that was plastered on the front page of a famous magazine depicting a taste of horror of an unpopular war. Bill continued, "I've seen a lot of things that...after you're over there awhile it don't phase you too much..."

The soldiers of South Korea, also known as ROK's, aided the forces of United States in the endeavor to overpower the Vietcong. These were the fiercest and most feared of the soldiers of U.S. alliance. "...they stunk worse than the Vietnamese people. ...they ate dogs and everything." recalls Bill. Mr. Wayne Fleming was asked about witnessing inhumane acts. "You would hear stories about it...you would see some cases where they brought prisoners back. The religion over there was such that the Vietnamese believed that if they were missing a body part,... they would not get to go to heaven as we know heaven...the Americans couldn't make the prisoners talk, but the ROK's

could. ...because they would cut them open and eat their heart. The rest would talk. There would be a body part missing." replied Wayne.

Personally, I have heard from some Vietnam Veterans of the many abhorrent actions committed by both American and Vietcong soldiers. Actions of unconscionable behavior like severing an ear or breast, some were accident or by following orders, but the profane horror of the ROK action is incomprehensible.

Rest and relaxation included movies on the airfield base, 'Tin City' and trips to Taiwan and Shanghai. Mr. Wayne Fleming related the excitement and entertainment of both cities, but stated that having fun in Shanghai was so expensive that he had to wire home for more money.

The sentiments of the Vietnam conflict of both Wayne and Bill Fleming is that this was a war that never should have occurred. They witnessed the waste by the armed forces. Mr. Wayne Fleming personally observed new heavy equipment pushed overboard from ships offshore. Mr. Bill Fleming stayed in Vietnam until his job was finished. From observation and explanation he knew the heavy equipment left on the ground would be there to stay. Both Wayne and Bill are firm believers that the Vietnam Conflict was a political war and sad waste of American lives. They feel that many businessmen and politicians became very wealthy because of this war. It was implied that greed and corruption infiltrated the very arteries of the ideals of the war effort.

Vietnam veterans <sup>whom</sup> that I have spoken with have painted a picture of destruction and human frailty mixed with fear and horrible acts of violence that led them to reason sordid questions of their own mortality...The Veterans

came back from Vietnam with a stigma of guilt and shame. Some of these Veterans have the nightmares and cold sweats associated with the post conflict trauma. All of the Vietnam Veterans <sup>who</sup> that I know who saw and participated in *action* tend to have serious difficulty interacting on the social level. The memories are painful and haunting, like a cancerous wound that can not heal.

The isolation or limited war influence is surely the reason that the impressions left with the Fleming brothers <sup>were</sup> was more positive with a focus on the countryside and the people. Both Wayne and Bill have a different outlook than someone who witnessed horrendous atrocities in a war torn country besieged by an unpopular conflict with negative political impacts and the intimidation of negative public opinion. They have been able to set aside the inhumane acts that were witnessed and move ahead with their lives. They spoke of lush tropical vistas and unique ebony beaches. Upon the course of their stay in South Vietnam, the brothers learned to understand many of the circumstances of the Vietnamese people and respect the customs of the South Vietnamese culture. They realized the brotherhood of humanity is merely accepting each other for what we believe in, and finding that we are indeed not much different.

The Vietnam War cost America over one hundred and fifty billion dollars. Three times the amount of American bombs were dropped on Southeast Asia than were dropped on both theaters in W.W.II. The Vietnam War claimed the lives of two to three million Indochinese, and fifty-eight thousand Americans. The loss of our loved ones is irreplaceable. The amount of suffering by the Vietnam veterans is incalculable.

Good interview  
Very interesting information

Good job

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