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Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

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150 Mallard Pt. Circle

on the date(s) of January 29, 1995

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

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Interviewee's signature

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Date 1-29-95

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Interview Questions

1. From your childhood, can you tell me some of your memories and what times were like as compared to now.
 2. What was high school like?
 3. Describe social etiquette in the 1950's and 1960's as compared to now.
 4. What things fill your life now? Describe your family.
 5. Do you feel you have a better life than your parents?
 6. What were the circumstances in joining the Marine Corps?
 7. What are your thoughts about the controversy of the United States' involvement in the war?
 8. Kennedy and Johnson believed that if one country holds another that others will follow, are you in agreement with this?
 9. Describe combat, are the depictions in film and documentary accurate?
 10. What are your thoughts on the raiding of the village of My Lai? Do you think Lt. Calley was justified?
 11. What did the servicemen think of all of the commotion at home over the protests?
 12. Has your experience in the war affected your life, and has it made some aspects clearer?
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Rodney Clark Hightower
By:Allison Hodgins
Date:1/29/95
Subject:Vietnam War

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Tape 1, Side 1

1. Pressure on young adults was less severe as he was growing up as it is at the present time.
2. He discusses the day he joined the Marine Corps in 1968 and the reasons why.
3. He discusses the phases of training and his Military Occupational Status.
4. He was shipped to Vietnam in July of 1968.
5. They were issued equipment and attached to a company in "the rear with the gear and beer".
6. He was involved with a small squad to to severe injury on Hill 521.
7. He describes a patrol and their purpose.
8. He explains what a pointman is and how there is always a new one.
9. A soldier's frame of mind due to the surroundings.
10. The first time he was shot at was by an American on Hill 90.
11. There were some good times such as sitting in Elephant Valley near the South China Sea watching the Airborne Company.
12. The actions of the villagers toward his presence varied.
13. His first tour was from Hill 90 to Elephant Valley and it was named so for the grass.
14. He was notified four months ago about a friend during the war who had contact with Agent Orange. Due to the contact, all of his joints in his body have been replaced.
15. The first operation was uneventful, yet the constant fear is always there.
16. Concerning the villagers, a day does not go by that the thought of Vietnam does not enter his mind.

Tape 1, Side 2

1. The first thing he noticed on running patrols was that 98% of the time he was not welcome.
2. He shut the feelings of the villagers out because of fear, loneliness and hostility.
3. Most of the villagers were not aware of what was going on due to illiteracy and poor communication throughout the country.
4. His first injury was an immersion foot, which is overexposure to water causing the skin to peel off.
5. His reasons for going on a second tour.
6. He became a scout, who was guided by a captured Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army soldier.

7. Before his second tour, he took leave to go home to Memphis where he told his mother about returning to "over the pond".
8. The film Platoon is the most accurate depiction of Vietnam in his opinion.
9. At the time, he was not very aware of the political movement in the United States.
10. Sometimes things got ridiculous such as the cease of bombing on the Ho Chih Minh Trail and cutting off of supplies to make an inspection look well.
11. The sight of such death makes a person very callous and and they develop and attitude.

Tape 2, Side 1

1. In his opinion, he is not so sure that some countries are not better off by being controlled by another country.
2. To a large percent of the population of Vietnam, the war made no difference to them.
3. The way the Americans were trying to fight the war was insufficient.
4. The pressure that was needed in certain areas such as the Ho Chih Minh Trail and Ho Chih Minh City was taken off and that was a joke.
5. Interrogation of the villagers for information has caused memories that the only thing he can do is to live with them.
6. A person does what he feels is best for everyone and necessary at the time.
7. Some circumstances meant burning down villages and letting the villagers know that he meant business.
8. A soldier thinks, "What do I have to do to survive this crap?" The fear is constant after seeing all of the dead bodies.
9. His childhood was not very pleasant and he describes his family.
10. He participated in some school activities.
11. His childhood was spent looking after himself and filled with anger, which may have been a reason for joining the Marine Corps.
12. Social etiquette in the 1990's has virtually dissappeared as compared to the 1950's and 1960's. He was taught as a child that he could be polite to other people if nothing else.
13. A great disservice to this country was the removal of the draft.
14. He is a firm believer in capital punishment.

Tape 2, Side 2

1. He is currently receiving 50% disability as the result of being wounded by a mortar round.
2. After being wounded, he was discharged eighteen months

early and went to Houston, Texas where he worked construction and painted buildings.

3. He started college at State Tech in Memphis, where he met his wife, Martha.
4. He was married on August 21, 1971 and he had his first child , Robin one year later.
5. His second child, Renee was born in 1975 and his only son, Skooter was born six years later.
6. He describes all of his children and their personalities.
7. He answers the question, "Have I killed anyone?"
8. Many things today remind him of Vietnam, yet he tries to go forward.
9. The effect of the war on his life today makes him wonder as we all do about the meaning and purpose of our lives.
10. Description of his wife and how he is grateful that she has stayed around throughout the years.

INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Rodney Clark Hightower M/F MALE

Address: 150 Mallard Pt. Circle Pelham, AL 35124

Phone number(s): (205) 663-2376

Approximate age or date of birth: 45 years old

Mother's Name: _____

Father's Name: _____

Places lived and when: _____

Education: _____

Religion: _____

Business, political and social memberships (past and present) _____

Present occupation: _____

Former occupations: _____

Special Skills: _____

Major Accomplishments: _____

National Events in which interviewee has participated: VIETNAM WAR

Local Events in which interviewee has participated: _____

National born U.S. citizen? Yes No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: _____

Country from which he/she emigrated: _____

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee: _____

Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview: _____

Additional information: _____

Perspectives on Vietnam By a Soldier: Rodney Hightower

The topic of the Vietnam war is important to our history for three main reasons. First, is the issue of American people having skepticisms of their own government. It created a time when people openly challenged and questioned the integrity of the government. Second, is the realization of evils in our own society. Although war has always been a significant part of history of the world, the war in Vietnam made people question the destruction of people and of the environment to create radical movements in the United States. Thirdly, the number of casualties the United States suffered made citizens wonder if it was ^{worth} all of the sacrifice. The interviewee of this project is an excellent source of first-hand information due to the fact that he served two tours in Vietnam with the United States Marine Corps. The purpose of this paper was to have a vivid look at what it was like to be a soldier during the war.

Rodney Clark Hightower Sr. was born on August 21, 1949 in Memphis, Tennessee. He refers to his father as an "every other month father" because his father worked on the Mississippi River and hauled freight every other month. As the child of alcoholics, he spent the majority of his childhood filled with anger and ^{fending} finning for himself. He sums it up by saying, "My childhood could have been a hell of a lot better and it is not one that I would subject my own children to". At the age of eighteen, he decided to join the Marine Corps due to his curiosity, and he really had nothing to tie him down at home.

The history of Vietnam has always been filled with wars

and constant struggles for freedom. The war began over the issues between the north and south parts. Ho Chih Minh was the ^{nationalist} leader in the north seeking to unite the two under the Communist party against Ngo Dinh Diem in the south. The country was split on the Seventeenth Parallel in 1954 at the Geneva Conference. The United States got involved in 1961 when John F. Kennedy ^{1945 w/ marj & 1954 8} began to send in money and military advisors to the South Vietnamese Army. By the end of 1963, the number of Americans in Vietnam had increased to 16,000. (Nash 989)

Kennedy had many reasons to get involved in Vietnam. First, is to contain communism. At the time, the threat of communism scared many people and they believed in the domino effect. It essentially means that if one country in a region falls, others are bound to follow. (Nash 990) Second, was to promote democracy around the world. Third, was the attitude that the U.S. should be good to other countries and help them out when they are unable to run themselves under their new government.

Rodney joined the Marine Corps in 1968, and after receiving training in the areas of booby traps and guerilla warfare in San Diego, California he was off to Vietnam through Okinawa. ^{PP} He was attached to a float phase at the SO plant outside of Da Nang. ^{← explain Army term ↓} His squad was very small, it only contained four men, where a typical squad has twelve to fourteen. This was due to the fact that they had suffered losses in a battle on Hill 521. When a soldier is fresh "in country" they are allowed

to stay for two weeks "in the rear with the gear and beer". The rear is the safer place to be and the fear is less constant. Hartline describes it as "very cold beer, any brand of cigarettes you wanted, hot food, and some even had their own girlfriends there who were paid so much every month." (Hartline 96) After the rear, you became a pointman. The pointman is the first to walk on a patrol and guides it by listening and watching for everything that moves. Rodney says that "there was always a new pointman and if you survived for more than three to four months, you just might make it."

As a soldier he ran patrols and ambushes. On a patrol, the purpose is to let your presence be known to the villagers and find out if VC were there. During a patrol, Rodney says that sometimes you had to "rough them up" for information. He vividly remembers beating up a woman for information which he thinks of often, but as he says, "you do what you think is right at the time and what will save the most lives." An ambush is really the same thing as a patrol, except at night where it is much more difficult because of the darkness and the fear is greater.

A soldier usually had many experiences with death and unusual feelings they normally would not have under normal conditions. The first experience with death came for Rodney as he was shot at by an American. The man had been in country for nine months and was very intoxicated and went crazy as he and some men were walking up a hill to the SO Plant. The man

began to cuss at them and fire his weapon at everyone. The gunnery Sgt. chose to kill the man with an m79 grenade launcher. Rodney had to help to carry the body up the hill, and the thought that was going through his mind was, "What are they going to tell his family?" The Sgt. did at the time what he thought was the best thing for everyone, as Rodney explains, it may not always be right, yet you only have seconds to act and you do what is best in the long run of things. Rodney says that you become cold and callous to the situation. You become desensitized to the situation of dead bodies, shut people out for fear of losing them, and you become very lonely.

During the war, a peace movement began in the United States. Rodney says at the time he did not know much of what was going on. The invasion of Cambodia sparked many protests, the most tragic at Kent State University in Ohio. At the protest, four students were killed by Ohio National Gaurdsmen on May 4, 1970. (Higgins 112) An organization called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other organizations began campaigning against the draft, attacking ROTC units on campuses, and sought to discredit firms that produced tools of war. Their slogans were "Make love, not war", and "Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?" In 1967, more that 300,000 people marched in New York City and in Washington, D.C., 100,000 tried to close down the Pentagon.(Nash 992) David Hartline has this to say about the movement: "Here we are lying on our backs wounded, fighting for the freedom of these people , trying to

stop Communism before it spreads any further. If these hippy bastards could really see what Communism really did to people: how they took away all of their rights , they would want it stopped before it got to the U.S. . Most were just chicken shit and had an easy life. Them protesting the war was like feeding the enemy and if I had my way I would send them over there and try them "for treason."(Hartline 95)

The war sparked a distrust in the government. The Pentagon Papers, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg who was a defense analyst, gave Americans a first-hand look at the fabrications and faulty assumptions that had guided the steady expansion of the struggle. (Nash 996) The people had been told that the war was going smoothly and we were winning it. In actuality, we were losing badly. " The distrust began with Johnson's administration because he was so adamant at winning the war no matter what the cost. Johnson said, "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China did."(Nash 992) ^{new paragraph} Another incident was that of Agent Orange. It is a a chemical defoliant to kill crops and bush so they could see the enemy. In South Vietnam, the U.S. Air Force sprayed more than 100,000 tons of toxic chemicals. It claimed more than two million human victims and 3,500 are dead. It also affected the Americans themselves. (Higgins 135) Rodney says that he recently heard from a friend he served with who had contact with Agent Orange and has had all of the joints in his body replaced due to the contact. One final example to mention is the incident at the village

of My Lai. On March 16, 1968 more than five hundred men, women and children were slaughtered under the command of Lt. William Calley. (Higgins 115) He went to court for the deaths of at least twenty-two people. He was sentenced to life in prison and then it was reduced to ten years. As the furor died down, he was released. (Nash 993) Asked at the trial whether he ever felt the need to discriminate between legal and illegal orders, Calley replied that he never knew he had a choice. "If I had questioned an order, I was supposed to carry the order out and then come back and make my complaint." (Bilton 53) Rodney says that he does not know much about the incident or details of My Lai, but the Lt. may have been given false information and the Company may have felt fear and acted as they did out of that fear and suspicion.

The war still affects his life today. He was discharged eighteen months early ~~of~~^{to} the result of being hit by a mortar round, where he spent six months in the hospital. He currently receives fifty percent disability for the injury. Rodney thinks of Vietnam often. He remembers faces and images that he wishes that he could forget, yet one has to live on and strive to reach the next plane in life. He says, " I am not ashamed of serving in the Marine Corps , serving in Vietnam, and what I stood for at the time. I am disgusted at the way the politicians handled the whole thing. Men and women were doing what they felt right and people at home not really giving a damn."

At present, Rodney resides at home with his wife and one

remaining child in the household and is currently retiring from his job due to health problems. He has suffered two heart attacks in the last year and is now on the waiting list for a transplant. The experiences he has had in life have made him appreciate life itself more, put the past in the past, and try to go forward.

Good job
great interview
revised or proof paper
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