

# "It was like being a member of the mafia, man." - Two Vietnam Veterans Interviewed

Interviews Conducted  
by Michael Greenfield & Lambros Hadzis

There were many Veterans who came back from the Vietnam War physically and mentally ruined. There were many who did not come back at all. There were many, though, who were able to survive it; some of them are here at Dal. Knowing this, we tried to discover how the war affected their lives. We quickly came to the opinion that they were victims either of their ignorance or the system.

It is important to keep in mind, while reading these interviews, that to survive an inhuman situation you have to be inhuman. The responsibility lies with those who created this situation and those who let it go on as long as it did.

The approach was more like a friendly conversation than a formal interview. So that they would feel themselves at ease and express themselves freely.

So here they are two fellow students - two Vietnam Veterans .... enjoy them ..... and think about it

## Interview #1: Tom

Q: Why did you join the army?

A: I joined because I was going to be drafted three days later. To keep from being a grunt I joined, and ended up in the Signal. A Grunt is an infantry soldier. A signal is a little bit of everything, Tele-communications, electronics, navigation. It's a lot better gig than being in the infantry running around out in the boonies [fields]. So I went to the signal school and then I went to Vietnam.

Q: How long did you stay in Vietnam?  
A: One year exactly, to the day.

Q: What did you think about going into Vietnam?

A: I didn't think much about going to Vietnam then. I thought about getting the leave time, getting away from the army. I did not think too much about going there until I was coming off my big drunk, the morning I was going to the airport. I thought "Now man"! That's what I thought.

Q: What did you think about the war, before you went to Vietnam?

A: I didn't know, I was curious.

Q: Give us some characteristic experiences of your army life.

A: When I was in basic, Signal school, they had a Sunday formation. Me and another fellow fell into formation in civilian clothes, and I got busted. The first example of their fucking prejudice scale, prejudice attitude, —making an example out of me and they did not fuck the other guy who was wearing civilian clothes. They gave me an article fifteen, took money from me and restricted me.

Q: Do they often take money from soldiers?  
A: Oh yeah! They do that all the time. The company punishes you, if you want to refute the article 15 they can court-martial you. Big Choice.

I went to Nam, worked on helicopters in Nam. Used to get a lot of rockets and mortars. That's the extent I saw of shit hitting the fan. The job I had, I thought, was fairly interesting. Comparing the circumstances to the other GI's, I thought I had it relatively decent. I didn't have to go out in the field and I did not have to shoot anybody, do any of that shit. I saw a buddy in Vietnam, from my hometown when I went over to Pley-Ku. We got really fucked up there, drugs, drunk, right out of it man. And get this! This is another example of their authority rammed down my throat. I had a hat with wings on it. I came back from the showers the night that I stayed there. It was so fucking Mickey Mouse that they had inspection, — this-is in Vietnam, right. I couldn't believe it, this is in Pley-Ku where I went to see my friend. The officer had my hat in his hand and said, "Is this your hat?" and I said, "Yeah". He threw it on the floor and said, "What are you doing here? What is your name?" All these off the wall questions, being really arrogant. So I proceeded to tell him arrogantly myself. He kicked me off that fucking compound. "You

get off my compound!" he said. And like everybody has their own compound that they're in command of, all the lifers, [lifers refers to career officers] all the brass. And I had to leave his compound. He told my friend to tell me, to take myself and my arrogance and leave. So I had to leave. I was visiting my home town friend, and for trivial reasons he told me to leave. I had the wrong hat on.

Q: What was your attitude towards the natives?

A: When I first got over there I had, I'd say, a conditioned attitude towards them. I felt that they were the reasons that I was there. I soon saw the light, had a lot of time to think and I changed my mind about it. Like, before I left Nam I had gotten pissed off at the lifers and they had gotten pissed off at me. And I told them I didn't want to work in their fucking avionics shop. They wouldn't let me out, they said that I had to work here, they were short of men and all of this shit. So I made a mistake on purpose, I was supposed to fix these choppers that were going out in the morning, and like I didn't fucking do it. So the next day they put me on the first sergeants detail. Which is nothing man, like I didn't do nothing for the whole fucking week. Then after a while they got me watching the gooks — the natives. Well they'd have them come in, they'd have them do the really low work, like burn shit, literally. They'd have big tubs where you would burn shit. And they'd fill sandbags, and stuff like this. And I was watching them to make sure they did not do this and that. They'd do a lot of things, one time I caught one of them stealing. Like, he stole a poncho, like, I could have really fucked him bad, but I didn't, I let him have it. All this dude had was a pair of sandals, if he had that, underwear and a piece of plastic. And it was raining like a mother-fucker that day. I figured he needed it more than that fuckin' officer he stole it from. So I let him have it.

I thought the natives were nice people, at least the ones I came into contact with. They seemed to very patient.

Q: What did the natives think of you?

A: I don't know. You'd often wonder too man, cause they'd sit there, their eyes would be glossed over from smoking pot or something, and they'd look at you, and look at you. They wouldn't change their expression or nothing.

I was in DaNang once for a couple of days. For three days there were these people on the flight line waiting to get a ride in one of the choppers, nobody would give them a ride, cause they's say, well fuck you, we're not giving you a ride home 'cause you got slant eyes. Like, fuck, they didn't want to bother with them. Like when I left three days later they were still waiting, right there in the same place, man, for a ride up into some fucking off the wall place.

Q: How did you get along with your fellow soldiers?

A: We all got along real well. Except this one Sergeant who kept on screwing me up for my promotions. All the men got along real well, except with the lifers. They had quite an outlook on life, really. I could sum the lifer up in one sentence. Their whole gig was hassling people. Right on down the fuckin' line. They were ignorant assholes! You had to do exactly what they said, and if you didn't your ass was in shit, man. No matter how stupid it was.

Anyway, after Nam, man, I come back, and I was working for these lifers, officers in the avionics course, until I got busted for selling acid. I was exonerated in my court martial.

Q: Was there a lot of acid going on there?  
A: When I was in Georgia, there was a lot of acid going on. When I was in Nam I didn't see any hard drugs. Just some opium. All there was in Nam was unbelievable grass.

So, anyway, they put me into the stockade when I got busted. While in the army stockade I actually saw, and I wouldn't have believed it unless I actually had seen it, a guy eat razorblades, actually swallow them and he didn't cut his mouth or anything. He was fuckin' crazy. To say the least.

Q: How was the stockade?

A: Sucks, sucks really bad, man. Barbed

wire with soldiers all around having their guns trained on you all the time. We used to go up to this lake area, it was like in a chain gang, you know, guards with shotguns, man. You'd go out there and cut grass, out in the woods. It's unbelievable, then you'd go over to eat and they'd watch you and they always got guns on you. Just like in Cool Hand Luke, man. Just before I got out of the stockade, one guy did run and he got shot in the fuckin' back. Cause he tried to run.

Q: Was it fatal?

A: No.

Q: What do you feel about an American soldier shooting another American soldier?

A: Well, it's like he is in a bind, man. Like if he doesn't shoot him and he does escape, his ass is goin' to be in a bind. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine did that. This guy tried to escape or something, and my friend was a really, really good shit. A prisoner escaped on him and they gave him unbelievable shit. He had to get himself a lawyer and everything, to prove his innocence, that it wasn't his fault. It probably was his fault, but he didn't want to go to fuckin' jail man, cause it was.

Q: Did you ever have a really good time while you were in the army?

A: The best week over there was when I got to go anywhere in the Far East, man, or Australia, for a week. I went to Tai Pei, Formosa. It has legalized prostitution. The bars were just packed with women. They really rolled out the red carpet for you. That was probably the only nice week I had there.

Q: Now that you're out of the army, what can you say about it as an organization?

A: I hated the army and everything it stood for. It rammed its authority down my throat. I'm still bitter about it to this day. It was the hassle of my life, to say the least.

Q: Now that you're out of Vietnam what can you say about American involvement there?

A: I thought the war was wrong, naturally. After my time, towards the end over there in Nam, I sort of formed an opinion that, that country would probably be better off with communism. That's the way I felt about it, that maybe they were right. Who's to say who's right and who's wrong. I mean the United States had all the might, but it didn't make 'em fuckin' right in that war.

Q: When you got back home how were you treated?

A: The older people thought I was patriotic and I did the right thing cause they still believed that way. The older vets were brought up, conditioned, to equate patriotism with militarism. The people my own age just treated me normally.

Q: What did you think concerning the draft evaders?

A: As time went on, in the army, I thought they had a lot of perception.

Q: What do you think about President Ford's amnesty program?

A: I think it's a crock of shit. I think they should be given unconditional amnesty. I don't think they're criminals. They didn't do anything wrong. 'Cause they didn't go to war, man? That's fuckin' criminal not to go to war? No, man.

Q: Did your attitude toward your country change?

A: It did change my views on America and what my great country was doing. In America, there is a lot of things wrong, but still there are a lot of things right too.

Q: Would you feel differently if you were in a World War II type of situation, if you had to fight the Nazis?

A: I am not a pacifist in general. I say yes, I did hate the army's authority, but chances are I probably would feel different about a different war. But then again, I have no intention of fuckin' dying for anybody else's beliefs. Not ever again am I going to get myself involved in a situation like that. If there is a war coming near me or approaching me I am going to try to evade it, no matter who fucking war it is. It sucks.

## Interview #2: Joe

Q: Why did you join the army?

A: Ignorance. I joined the military because of ignorance. I was going to school and I was young and I was foolish and I was bored going to school. I thought if I joined the military my life would not be so boring, which it wasn't. I thought I'd have some excitement introduced into my life. It was a bad mistake though, I got myself into a sick situation. I consider the military a sick situation.

Q: Give us an abbreviated edition of your military career?

A: I was going to Dalhousie in '68 and quit to join the military. Went in and took my basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey. An unbelievable introduction to ignorance. Went on with Advanced Individual Training for the infantry. Was in that for a while, then went into Officers Candidate school, busted my back up there. I spent time in hospitals in Georgia and Washington. Got out of that and had what's called a Profile, that is my body was screwed up and there were certain things I could not do. They assigned me as a light vehicle driver, down to Fort Ustis, Virginia.

Q: How did your back get screwed up?

like me, didn't like how I thought, what my opinions were, so he just screwed me. Told the Head Chaplain that I was inefficient in my work, was constantly using abusive language in front of the young nurses. He told the Head Chaplain that I was selling heroin and doing this and that. None of which was true. So I went to work for this group maintenance office. Had to do with handling of the logistics of the parts coming in for the helicopters, and the maintenance task for each helicopter, what was needed to fix it and all that shit. A lot of paper pushing.

Q: How did you get into combat?

A: Well, I was stationed at headquarters there, and I didn't like working there, with all the lifers around. So I kept on their ass to get a door-gunner job. I was already in a helicopter control headquarter. So I kept pestering them and they finally sent me as a door-gunner up to DaNang to join this company.

Q: What does a door-gunner do?

A: A door-gunner provides security for the helicopter. He can return fire. If you are going in on an assault, you have a series of helicopters going in on an area. They land or hover above the ground while troops fan out and assault some objective. And if they open



**WELL, I GUESS YOU CAN KILL SOME OF THE PEOPLE MOST OF THE TIME, AND MOST OF THE PEOPLE SOME OF THE TIME. AS LONG AS YOU DON'T KILL ALL OF THE PEOPLE ALL OF THE TIME**

A: I had a bad back when I went into the military, hedged on my application. Some of the training was so strenuous that it sent it out of whack.

I got to Fort Ustis and didn't like the company I was getting into. At personnel when I was signing into the army post, I noticed that they had an opening for a Chaplain's assistant. So I talked my way into a Chaplain's assistant's job, which I thought would be a pretty soft gig, and it wasn't that bad. What a Chaplain did, depending upon the Chaplain himself, some Chaplains had a deep concern and were willing to go to bat for young troops. Other Chaplains were mainly interested in their career, in the chaplaincy and the military. They just wouldn't go out of their way. I mean they'd put on the Sunday service and pitter-patter around and try to dispense some happiness to the lifers, and keep everything tied up as far as the lifer's morals were concerned. I happened to work for a real nice dude, he really tried to help people out. Other chaplains were mainly concerned with supporting the military, they didn't care what happened to the individuals.

Anyway I volunteered to go to Vietnam to get an early out, out of the military, and get more money. Besides, I thought there would be less lifer harassment, being a chaplain's assistant I didn't think I'd have it that bad.

Well, I got into a Chapel over there and started working for this pompous, overbearing, asshole. Didn't like him and he didn't

fire on you, you defend yourself and try to put down effective cover for the troops you are landing.

Our helicopter company was unique, it was an Aero-Calvalry company. A lot of other companies were used mainly to land infantry and give support. Our company, the helicopters, were used mainly as support to the Scout Missions. That is, they were used as recovery ships. Or they were used as Night Hawk ships, which was a special sub-division of our company. I was a door-gunner for awhile, and then I became a Night Hawk. At night you'd go out in this helicopter, and you'd have a mini-gun and a xenon light on the right side, and a 50 caliber and a 360 on the left. And you'd go out and you'd give support to units in contact, or you'd just cruise around different areas Intelligence told you enemy troops were infiltrating into. And flick on the light while you were real low and try to catch dudes at night. If you caught 'em and they were bad guys, you greased 'em, right. I saw a lot of combat as a Night Hawk, I liked it better in the day though, when you could see more what was going on. At nighttime you were just firing at flashes, muzzle flashes. Once in a while you'd catch some dudes in the light there, and you'd just eat 'em up with that minigun, cut 'em up to pieces. But it wasn't as pretty, wasn't as much action as in the daytime scout missions.

Q: Was it enjoyable?  
A: Yeah! It was enjoyable.

Q: What was the most enjoyable aspect of getting up in the air and shooting people?

A: I don't know. There are a lot of enjoyable aspects, I used to enjoy the scenery, I used to enjoy getting a grenade in a bunker, you know, when you flew over it. I used to enjoy burning hootches. I wasn't gung ho about the war. Even when I was a Chaplain's assistant I got a few rockets dropped on me. I did not feel any compunction about going out and doing battle with these individuals. I was just a soldier and they were trying to kill me, and I was trying to kill them. It wasn't anything personal.

Q: What did you feel toward the North Vietnamese soldiers?

A: Anger sometimes, admiration.

Q: Why admiration?

A: Because a lot of them were courageous, gung ho individuals. They would fight against unbelievable odds. I admire that in anyone.

Q: How did you feel toward the South Vietnamese?

A: Just like I'd feel toward anyone. I felt a little bit of apprehension because within the society the guerillas make a practice of blending in with the people, and then the people as a whole were poor, had a hard time, so you had to watch that they didn't rip you off. But, I just thought of them as people, people that acted like people would have, in the circumstances they were in.

Q: Did fighting change many people?

A: Yeah. A nice kid from the neighborhood just doesn't go around talking with the boys that night about how many people he killed, and you should've seen what I did to this guy and how I blew up that.

Q: Did you all do that?

A: Yeah we all were. It was like being a member of the mafia, man. It was a big thing, the scouts that went out on missions that day, when everybody was back at the hootch that night getting it on drinking wine, getting high. The guys that were out that day would tell us what they did. Some of them were really good raconteurs, they'd describe their mission in gory detail. Others would offer pointed criticisms, or applause, where warranted. It was a good thing, we learned from each other, what the other guy had experienced, what fucked him up, what you should watch for. We were proud of being scouts. Also, the lifers left us pretty much alone. The Scouts had to pull weird missions and it took a lot to become a scout. With out us they could really get fucked up.

I had so many adventures, so many war stories. It was all one big war story. I remember one day, I burned so many hootches in this area that you couldn't work out there anymore. There was so much smoke that we were afraid to burn anymore, we were afraid of running into trees an shit. I remember all the time we were doing it we had our radios turned up. AFV, Armed Forces Vietnam, they had this rock music playing. So we listened to rock music while we were burning hootches. It was really great, I remember we listened to one song in particular that struck me, Sky Power- How High can you fly-bah bah bah. Really got off on that. The pilot was a young fella too and as we made a run on the hootches, firing up with the machine gun and putting white phosphorous grenades on it, I swear to god he had that ship in time with the beat of the base in that song.

It was a very intense thing, we were unbelievably alert. We were using everything we had. I liked the challenge of it. How many people have to actually fight for survival today. How many people have to go out knowing that there are going to be individuals out there that are going to try and kill them. How many people would go out and look for those individuals. I think that it is an unbelievable challenge.

I remember one time we went out and I saw this peacock running along the ground. I just had to shoot that fuckin' peacock. I used my machine gun on it and that didn't work. It really got me pissed, missing the thing. We were flying low and the bird was running along the ground, so I jumped out of the helicopter and started chasing it. I grabbed its tail and then I realized that I was in the middle of enemy territory, on the

ground. Fortunately, I was able to get back into the helicopter without getting killed.

There were a lot of really gung ho dudes. There was this one guy who when not flying would go down with the grunts. 'Cause each of us, was trying to compete with the other individuals, see who could do the biggest and most bold and great thing. It was like trying to be a high school basketball star. We were trying to see who could do the most killing and shit like that.

Q: What was the most exciting non-combat time you had there?

A: I remember one thing, in Quan-Tri near the Demilitarized Zone. Clearing out a few dudes, they wanted our Calvary unit up there. We pulled into this area late at night. Pulled in and bedded down in these little hootches with cots. Unbeknownst to me right behind us there was an artillery battery set up, and during the night they had a fire mission. They had 175's which were really big artillery pieces. During the night those things opened up, man, I thought the whole world was blowing up. I thought the whole North Vietnamese army was coming across the D.M.Z.. Man, I came about fifteen feet off that cot just twisting in the air. Scared the shit out of me. Another time something just like that happened. The third of July, they had what's called the mad minute, right when the third of July at twelve o'clock changed into the fourth of July. Everyone just opened up with all their shit. I was sleeping in my helicopter out on the flight line, and I thought it was the end of the world. It scared me so bad, I was so freaked out, it took me thirty seconds before I finally got my hands on a gun. Every time; there was an explosion I was just twitching and clawing around in the dark. I came to, just clawing at everything.

Q: Did you get stoned often?

A: Yeah. We were tripping one night and had a ground attack, in DaNang. We wandered outside and flares were going off in the air and there was firing from the perimeter. We kept looking at the perimeter, looking through our hallucinations for little dudes trying to crawl through.

We used to have a lot of good times getting high. When I was at Chow-Lye we used to lay down at the end of the runway, Watch the big C-1 30's coming in there, they'd land just behind your head. When it was coming down with its big landing lights on, and you were laying on the ground, it looked as if they were landing on your forehead.

Q: Was there a lot of Hard drugs?

A: Yeah. A lot of scag when I was there. A lot of companies had a real addiction problem. I know it was really bad shit, so I watched myself. There were maybe ten or twelve really hard scag freaks in my company. What they were doing over there would just be hundreds of dollars a day habit. Over there heroin was really cheap, it was 95% pure, you could get a jug for five to eight dollars, which was quite a large amount.

Q: What was it in Vietnam that screwed up so many people?

A: I'm inclined to think that if anything made American military men susceptible to the use of drugs, it was the military. The way the military is, the pressures it puts upon the individual, the absurd unreasonable life-style. Not the war necessarily. Still, I must emphasize it wasn't just the military, it was the individuals. A lot of people can handle a lot of stress and adapt a different behavior to it, rather than get hooked on drugs.

Q: What about the problem of hostility and actual physical violence between the officers and the rest of the soldiers?

A: It used to happen pretty frequently in Vietnam. Someone would give someone a hassle and someone would get a grenade and throw a fragmentation grenade under his bunk. It was usually done to an officer because of their arrogance.

There were a lot of individuals who I would like to get a chance to shoot. I'd enjoy that a lot more than shooting a lot of the VietCong. I didn't think it was worth it,