00;00;00;00 – 00;00;30;12

My name is Luke Aldridge. I'm interviewing Vietnam veteran Joe Featherston, who served in the Marines starting in 1956 and served two tours in Vietnam, one from April to December 1965 and one from 1968 to 1969. Mr. Featherston, this interview will have four sections Your Life before service, Basic training, your time in Vietnam and your Life After Service. So let's get started with your background.

00;00;30;15 – 00;00;34;26

Sure. Where did you grow up and what was your area known for?

00;00;34;26 – 00;00;56;11

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in September 1939. I grew up in, in the West Philadelphia area of very close to the University of Pennsylvania, and I lived there until I moved up to Northeast Philadelphia and went into the Marine Corps in 1956. Can you tell me about your family growing up?

00;00;56;14 – 00;01;18;11

My family? To the best of my knowledge, I'm the first person in my family to have a military experience. My father was not in the military during World War two. I had an uncle was in the merchant marine and, he was basically a seaman in the merchant marine during World War two, but nobody else.

00;01;18;13 – 00;01;38;23

My mother and father divorced in 1945. It was a lot of pressure. I ended up living with my father, along with my younger brother, who coincidentally, also became a marine. And my brother had the same birthday I did two years behind me and ended up being a field radio operator, just like me in artillery. Just like me.

00;01;38;26 – 00;01;59;06

Pretty pedestrian. Could be a lot of stuff going on in those days. It was a changing neighborhood, and it was a lot of struggles in the neighborhood and a lot of, almost a racial divide by a lot of gang stuff. And it was a good place to be away from. And, when I as I mentioned earlier, when I was 16, I decided I was doing well in high school.

00;01;59;06 – 00;02;23;11

It was time to go find a better life in the first fork in the road was going to the Marine Corps recruiter. So I was in the Marine Corps very

early on my 17 birthday. And did you have any siblings other than your younger brother? An older brother was born deceased, you know, before he was before me. And then, my brother and I both had a birthday, September 26th, 39 and 40 and 41.

00;02;23;11 – 00;02;27;09

But that was weird. What your siblings.

00;02;27;12 – 00;02;48;28

Do you have any memories of men around you telling war stories from World War Two? Sorry. Again. Do you have any memories of men around you telling war stories from World War Two? No, because I was too young to really understand it or listen. But I do have memories of seeing Philadelphia during World War two and seeing convoys of Army vehicles in aircraft.

00;02;48;28 – 00;03;08;10

Guns in the air, in the parks. I remember, I remember that, but no, I never heard any really war stories. I had, on my mother's side. I had an uncle who was in the Navy. He was a Seabee, and both of his sons were in the Navy. So it was two generations of that that part of the family that served in World War Two.

00;03;08;13 – 00;03;24;26

Excuse me, but, that's basically all. And they didn't talk to you about it? Never had the opportunity, unfortunately. Did you have a favorite World War Two movie growing up?

00;03;24;28 – 00;03;45;14

So every one of them, my mother used to take me to see every, every world war. Was it just a kid went to see every one of them. Battle ground battle cry. Were for famous scenes of people. Jima was a landmark, especially when it hit Parris Island. But, they were all Hollywood productions. They weren't real. And, you know, you took them.

00;03;45;14 – 00;03;50;07

You took them as entertainment rather than history.

00;03;52;04 – 00;04;00;12

Now, I'd like to move on to the start of your service and basic training. Would you describe yourself as volunteering, being commissioned or drafted?

00;04;00;12 – 00;04;17;15

Oh. Was voluntary? Absolutely. And what were the main reasons you volunteered to join the Marine Corps? Because I didn't see any future for me in Philadelphia with no, no education and no real serious role models.

00;04;17;17 – 00;04;30;19

I needed to change my direction in life. I didn't realize what I was doing. I mean, I was too young to know what I was doing, but, it turned out to be a very fortuitous decision.

00;04;30;22 – 00;04;52;23

You changed your life. Dramatically changes when you go to boot camp. And why did you choose the Marines? I don't know, I think because I didn't see myself without being disrespectful to any of the services. I didn't see myself in any of the other branches of service, I didn't. There was nothing there that appealed to me. And the Marines had a reputation for being tougher.

00;04;52;25 – 00;05;17;09

And, more engaged. And I thought that was the thing to do. You know, race, build men, build me. You know. So you mentioned that you were 16, 17 when you entered 17, 16 going into 17 when I saw in you. So how did that impact you joining the service? Did you feel pressure to join at that age?

00;05;17;12 – 00;05;37;14

No, there was no pressure to to join. I mean, it was it was the country was a lot more patriotic in those days than it is today. I mean, it was more or less expected that most males for sure would serve somehow, some way, somewhere. And I think that it was it was just a normal thing.

00;05;37;16 – 00;06;02;07

Not so much for the female side at that point. Okay. But which was certainly for the males. And the Marine Corps was where I wanted to go. And then I said, oh my God, what did I do? So how would you describe your boot camp experience? Terrifying. I would say that the first thing that happens is when you get off the bus, it's 2:00 in the morning and you're on Devil's Island because you can't see anything.

00;06;02;07 – 00;06;22;14

There are no lights. You can't see anything. And this was 1956, so wasn't wasn't filled up. And when you get off the bus, there's that. You're screaming at you from the instant. You can't even do it. When you get off the train in the embassy, they start screaming and I scream. They scream for 48 hours, 22 hours, nonstop.

00;06;22;17 - 00;06;44;17

And it's pretty terrifying, you know? So how difficult was the experience? The whole boot camp experience. How? If you didn't take it one day at a time, it was terrifying. If you took it one day at a time, you just did what you were told and did to the best of your ability, and they knew that you were doing it to the best of your ability.

00;06;44;19 - 00;07;05;08

You somehow you survived it, and you get through it. And each day you get stronger, and each day you get smarter, and each day you become more less of an individual and more of a team. And that's that's the goal was is to go forward. And so I don't remember losing anybody in boot camp. Maybe 1 or 2 guys disappear at some point, but I don't remember losing a lot of people.

00;07;05;08 - 00;07;34;25

And we started with an 80 man platoon, which is twice the size of a normal person, and 8080 platoon, and graduated probably 70, 75, 76, 77 people. And this was a this was a three month boot camp. This was not eight weeks. This was a 13 week boot camp back in 1956. And how would you describe the boot camp experience for people around you?

00;07;34;27 - 00;07;57;13

For for the people around me? You didn't really talk to the other recruits. I mean, you really didn't have a lot of social time to talk to them. So whatever they thought or whatever they whatever they, they contemplated, you really didn't know? There were times when you would sneak a conversation or two around mail call you.

00;07;57;13 - 00;08;23;21

You'd have a very brief word, but you really didn't know it. And about half of the platoon came out of the Philadelphia Greater Philadelphia area. The other half came out of New England. So there were people that you had. Some had common backgrounds, some didn't. But, and in those days, you you did three months and then you when you left there on busses again, you went from there to camp was, you know, where you were through a months of infantry churning without any, any leave.

00;08;23;23 - 00;08;33;01

So, I mean, you were in training basically for four solid months before you ever left and went to your first command.

00;08;33;04 - 00;08;54;28

What, if anything, did you know about the country of Vietnam before you went there in 1965? I'm not even sure I knew the name of it at that point, because, we were stationed at my orders, were stationed in Hawaii, and we were scheduled to leave Hawaii and go to San Clemente Island for an operation at the time.

00;08;55;01 - 00;09;11;28

And we didn't go, and we were all working on a half a dozen ships at Pearl Harbor, and we went from out of Pearl Harbor. We were taken away. So two weeks after we got to Okinawa because of our security clearance, I was told over and pick up the maps, and the maps were all Vietnam. I said, we're not going back to California.

00;09;12;00 - 00;09;24;09

And that's when I first really learned about Vietnam. And that's where we were ultimately going. And we had very little time, really, to three days on the ship to prep for landing. And we made a combat landing in Vietnam.

00;09;24;09 - 00;09;32;17

Well, let's move on to your time in Vietnam, then. Could you describe your first 24 to 48 hours in country?

00;09;33;01 - 00;09;56;19

Sure. I was in an artillery battery. I was a direct support artillery battery, and they were split from a different couple of ships. I went to the perfumer and landing craft off of my ship, which is about 5 or 6 miles up the river, and we went up under combat conditions with helmets, flak jackets over head cover.

00;09;56;21 - 00;10;24;11

The other ships went into into the Nang, which were about 50 miles south, and that's where they unloaded the the guns and the howitzers and stuff like that. When we went down the road from way to Fubon, which was about 14km, maybe nine miles, we were locked and loaded. We were facing outboard on the trucks, and we were not smiling because we we were we were pretty professionals at that point, and we were in a combat situation.

00;10;24;13 - 00;10;44;28

The first 24 hours, we we established a base camp. We were living in 2 million pop tents. We're reading sea rations. We were drinking, you know. Okay, we're, and just trying to figure out which way we needed to be oriented. My job at the time was with the infantry, so I was not with my artillery battery.

00;10;44;28 - 00;11;04;15

I was with the infantry, and I was in a fire support coordination center. It began to level off in a couple of days, but we had we had casualties the first night. We took casualties the first night. So it was I mean, it was not not a you don't feel training program. Do you know if you were one of the first Marines to land in Vietnam?

00;11;04;17 - 00;11;28;16

Yes. We were. We were the first Infantry Battalion in northern Vietnam. Not North Vietnam and northern Air Corps. There was another infantry battalion who had come in a day or two before down south in Danang from the ninth Marines, but we were third Battalion, fourth Marines, and we were the only infantry battalion in what they called a Ta or which was a tactical area of responsibility.

00;11;28;16 - 00;11;55;17

So we had all basically from where we were over to the border. And what was your mission? My mission? I was a sergeant at the time. I was a communicator by trade. I was assigned to the FOB, the artillery liaison team with the infantry, and my job was to work in the in the fire support coordination Center and control the communications and fire missions of all my fellow teams.

00;11;55;19 - 00;12;15;28

So I had four full teams out, and they were capable of being split. So sometimes I would have eight FOB teams held and I had to handle all the communications, all the farm issues, back to the farm battery. And was your unit there to accomplish a specific task? So again, was your unit there to accomplish a specific task?

00;12;16;00 - 00;12;33;19

Do you was a direct support artillery battery. So whenever the infantry was in contact or needed suppression fire, they would call, they would call it better and we would fire in support of that. And so there was the mission was direct support of the infantry. Oh, yeah.

00;12;33;21 - 00;13;01;00

In 1965, would you describe yourself as being in combat in the rear or something else? The combat. 1965 was coverture. And how would you describe the work that you did during that? I'm her here, and you have to speak a little bit. How would you describe your work during your 1965 tour? Maintenance of equipment, for one thing.

00;13;01;01 - 00;13;32;06

Training of all my radio operators. What? Secondly, make to maintain your training to react and improve the quality of the fire missions and the ability to communicate. To support operations. You know, I was on a number of operations where you grew up on helicopters and you do helicopter landings and stuff like that. So there was a lot of that kind of stuff, but basically with a 24 hour day deal and you're you're working at whatever you need to work and not specific hours.

00;13;32;08 - 00;14;02;20

So it's, part and part of a team team effort. How would you describe your role in your second tour or my second tour? Quite different. I came out of Vietnam in December 1965, and I went to a war officer, officer, Kennedy School of Quantico. That was a two month OCS program with a fairly very high attrition rate, followed by three months of the base school, which all marine officers go through the base of the school.

00;14;02;22 - 00;14;23;24

And you're trained to be a small unit infantry leader. Every marine is a rifle and every marine is a rifleman. Coming out of that program. The lost my hammer was as a communicator. I went back to zero and started all over again in aviation support. So I had to learn how to be an aviation maintenance officer, supply officer, type of trainer.

00;14;23;27 - 00;14;51;16

By the time I went back to Vietnam the second time I was a first lieutenant, I was a squadron material officer, and my job was their support of a marine F-4 Phantom squadron in combat, which meant that I had 12 aircraft that I had to keep flying to the best of my ability. I had a small material search of about six people, and we process all the requirements of the squadron needed for maintenance to keep the airplane form.

00;14;51;18 - 00;15;15;12

The second part of that job turned out to be because of my ground background first time, and the fact that we're all infantry trained.

Well, I was the ground defense officer for the squadron, which meant that every time we got hit at night or I had a platoon of memories of reacted to that penetration, did that for nearly a year over year, I guess before totally before I came back out.

00;15;15;14 - 00;15;44;28

When you returned in 1968, what had changed the most since 1965? There was a war on 1965. It was it was, a very, I will say, wasn't a serious combat situation because it certainly was, but it was more exploratory. And it was and it grew. It grew and it grew in 1968 and 69, not only were referring to the economy, we were also fighting the North Vietnamese and maybe some Chinese.

00;15;45;01 - 00;16;11;01

So by that time, the war had really started heavy, and I went back in country the second time in 1968, a week after the Tet Offensive of 1968. And that was when the Vietcong, NVA simultaneously attacked almost every base in the entire country. So, you know, it took everybody by surprise. So there was all kinds of stuff that fell out from that Tet offensive.

00;16;11;03 - 00;16;22;04

And you were very you were very much aware that wherever you were, you were vulnerable. There wasn't there was no safe area.

00;16;22;07 - 00;16;44;21

In your first and second tours. How would you describe the people you served with in terms of economic background, race or religion? Well, let me short walk into that. Just sort of, number one, the first tour I was with the first Marine Brigade out of Hawaii. We were probably the best trained and best experienced combat outfit in the Marine Corps at the time.

00;16;44;23 - 00;17;07;25

I would use the term professionals in this light because I think that's what I would describe it. Every one of my people was highly trained, every one of the Marines, and my battery was highly trained. Everybody in the infantry regiment was highly trained. All the air wing people that were there were highly trained. But we began losing those people in almost immediately in Vietnam because of rotation.

00;17;07;25 - 00;17;41;01

When they came to the end of their time, their duty time, and they got orders, they began to leave. And then you had individual replacements

coming in rather than unit replacements. And the individual replacements coming in 1965 were basically out of regular Marine Corps, 1968 was quite different because the draft was in full effect, and a significant percentage of the people that were serving in Vietnam, and especially in infantry not so long ago, were draftees.

00;17;41;03 - 00;18;02;21

They were there for two years. They had no motivation to win the war, per se. They had the motivation to try to live through a 12 year assignment. If you were in the Army, 13 members of your in the Marine Corps. And they had a fit, those people, those draftees into the other Marines that were there longer had more experience.

00;18;02;24 - 00;18;27;22

And sometimes it worked well and sometimes not so well. The second part of that was that, In 1968, there was a lot of racial strife back in the United States, and the draftees brought that racial strife with them to Vietnam. And it was a perception that there was a disproportionate number of blacks in exposed areas and infantry and stuff like that.

00;18;27;24 - 00;18;45;27

It didn't it didn't really go well. And so one of the things that you were concerned with was the the appreciation that when you were out in the field, it didn't matter what color you were, you weren't fighting for glory, you weren't fighting for the country. You were fighting for your buddy next to you. It didn't matter.

00;18;45;29 - 00;19;07;17

But when you came back into the rear area and you had access to alcohol and entered the drugs that were floating around out there, which were a weapon, the Viet Cong would use drugs as a weapon. Then you had a lot of strife. There were a lot of instances back. There were small children would sell you marijuana or stuff.

00;19;07;20 - 00;19;32;08

Really cheaply because they wanted to debilitate the American troops. And and it was successful. And of course, there were a lot of a lot of violence, so you had to be aware, I think that not only do you have your regular combat mission, but you also had to maintain stability with your troops and you had to maintain security with other people.

00;19;32;10 - 00;20;04;20

And I mentioned everybody over there was carrying a loaded weapon. And

if you're if in a bag or for any reason or angry or. Big deal. What were some of the ways you could tell morale was worse in 1968 or among draftees? What were some of the ways you could tell that draftees and the military in 1968 was worse on morale than in 1965?

00;20;04;22 – 00;20;30;07

If I can back up just a second to say, between 1965 and 19 6869, a lot of things happened to were not strictly, strictly, one of the military mission civilization crept in. You had officers clubs, you had enlisted clubs. You had, all kinds of other things. So you had post exchanges who wanted to name was enormous.

00;20;30;09 – 00;20;57;26

There was an unreality about it, you know, hospital was stood up. Evacuation hospitals and Navy hospitals set up. They were not, like in this country, but they did. So it was it was a totally different kind of environment from 1965. It had morphed. And, and I think that the people that were over there maintained their sanity just inside their own organization.

00;20;57;28 – 00;21;19;18

You know, for example, when you weren't flying or you weren't fighting and you had a chance to go have a couple beers and, you know, you could unwind. It did work all the time, but it worked a lot. And we're still in touch with some of these people after 55 years or 60 years. I mean, that's how closely you you really get.

00;21;19;20 – 00;21;26;17

How did living in Vietnam and meeting Vietnamese people affect you?

00;21;26;19 – 00;21;47;17

It was a poor country. There were exceptions to that in way for him. It was severely civilized in a way. A little bit more civilized in the Danang, which was a bigger, a bigger city as well. But once you left that immediate area, it was dirt poor. And I mean dirt poor country. The people were poor.

00;21;47;17 – 00;22;08;29

They struggled everyday for everything. And we supported a lot. We supported orphanages, for example, in Vietnam. We supported the medical teams that went out and worked with the Vietnamese. We tried to show the best face of the United States, not just that we were there to fight the Viet Cong and NBA, but rather that we were there to try to improve and help the people.

00;22;09;01 - 00;22;34;13

So consequently, it went pretty well. There was an exception, however, which is worth talking about. And that is that we hired a lot of Vietnamese to do things in our on boots. They would come in and they would do the maid stuff. They would do stuff and any number of times when, when, when you want to get a haircut, if you and I went to get a haircut, we went in pairs.

00;22;34;16 - 00;23;05;09

And when you were in a chair getting your haircut, I was sitting in my in my chair with, with a pistol in my hand because the guy was cutting your hair that day was Viet Cong at night. And that's that's a true statement. The lady who was cleaning the hooch and so on. When she you see her recounting her steps from one place to another because they were using that information to target you with rockets and mortars and you didn't know who you you did not know who was Vietcong.

00;23;05;12 - 00;23;29;26

And do you know somebody who was Vietcong and who was not, there was an Oregon captain Army, the Republic of your non captain attached to my outfit. And the first three operations that we went on in 1965, we came up dry, we didn't get anything. And then the fourth operation, he was not there for the briefing. And we made contact.

00;23;29;28 - 00;23;41;15

So in that picture. So I gave you there's one picture of me with an M2 carbine that was his carbine, because I did not want him armed on that operation behind me because he was a double vision.

00;23;41;17 - 00;23;54;01

And nobody talks about that stuff. Do you think arriving shortly after Tet may have influenced your opinion of the Vietnamese coming in for your second tour?

00;23;54;04 - 00;24;17;22

No, but I will say this, there was no choice on the first tour. We were committed. And so you did what you were trained to do. If you came back for a second tour or third tour, it was quite different because you knew what you were getting into. You knew what was going on in the country, and you had a lot of doom and gloom from Walter Cronkite.

00;24;17;22 - 00;24;33;25

And for people like him on the media. So you went back in with your guard, up with this woman because you knew that was going to be dangerous. And there was a lot of a lot of illness. I mean, it was a huge amount of illness over there. As well as combat losses.

00;24;33;27 - 00;24;54;09

Earlier you mentioned children selling marijuana. What else do you remember about Vietnamese children on the one a pithy side of it, they didn't wear clothes from the waist down. So if you had a two year old three year old woman, you might have a shirt on. But if they had to make a head call, you just.

00;24;54;09 - 00;25;21;11

You just did it right in front of you. Women did it in front of you. I mean, it was a very common thing that bodily functions were were not a big deal for them. Maybe a little bit more educated and civilized in the cities, but around the country, not so much. Pretty primitive. And the kids, the kids I have pictures, I think of of kids running alongside the trucks when we were in a convoy, going somewhere, begging for food, and we would throw candy to them and stuff, but they were begging for cigarets.

00;25;21;11 - 00;25;46;13

They were five years old, begging for cigarets. Maybe not for them, but for somebody. So I still remember. And what a tragedy with the with the civilians. They took a lot of a lot of trouble if they were friendly to the American government or to the Arvin government, they were attacked by the Vietcong, sometimes murdered by the Vietcong.

00;25;46;16 - 00;26;15;18

And I should also say there are stories I, I don't have firsthand knowledge of were a kid could, would, would carry explosive and smoke at six years old, would carry an explosive and detonated standing among a bunch of Americans were a kid would show you a Coca Cola in a bottle, but you didn't want to drink a Coke because there was acid in the Coke or glass in the Coke happened a lot.

00;26;15;21 - 00;26;20;23

That was that kind of a war.

00;26;20;25 - 00;26;29;24

Did you experience any culture shock in Vietnam?

00;26;29;26 – 00;26;56;00

Other, other fact that we, even though we had some handouts about culture within the Vietnam, it really wasn't very well understood. The Vietnamese people had been fighting for 30 years. They they fought before, before World War Two. They fought the Japanese, they fought the French. And this was just another war for them. And they were in this for 100 years.

00;26;56;02 – 00;27;21;11

I mean, it was not, you know, we were there for 13 months, but they were there for 100 years of a talk. And their culture was very different to, they didn't respect women, obviously, as much as I think we would normally do. But gradually the American influence began to soften some of those hard core things for the for the local people.

00;27;21;11 – 00;27;46;19

They would learn from us and they would grow from that which was a which was a positive. You mentioned, Vietnamese culture handout. Could you expand on that? What did it say? It was a book. It was the U.S. government put out a small pamphlet they gave you said, you know, certain phrases to use, certain customs to be aware of, familiarization type thing they did at World War Two as well.

00;27;46;22 – 00;28;04;14

But again, it was dated stuff. It was not really useful in the real world. You had to learn as you went, excuse me. And how did the Vietnamese not respect women?

00;28;04;17 – 00;28;30;13

I can't say definitively, but I would say this, the male was superior to the female in country. They both work. But the women did a lot of grunt work. The male would not participate. Know how to cook, cooking. A woman would do all the all the cooking, all the cleaning, all washing. It was a very primitive society.

00;28;30;13 – 00;28;39;18

Unless you were in an urban area and had been to a to a higher level of education. Maybe it was a little bit different there. I didn't see that.

00;28;39;18 – 00;28;42;16

Do you remember Agent Orange being sprayed?

00;28;42;16 – 00;29;02;11

Very much so. In DNA in 1968 when we first moved in in there, my squadron came down from Japan, through the Philippines and back into country when their second in, right outside of the hangar were a bunch of 55 gallon drums in a field, I mean, literally 50ft from the hangar.

00;29;02;17 – 00;29;30;13

And they were all Asian orange, and they had to be moved and nobody knew what Agent Orange was in those days. So one of the officers in my squadron had to get a working party and raise a load of these 55 gallon drums or a truck and take them somewhere. And so they were they were handling the Air Force had an airplane called a C, 123 provider, and it was rigged with booms out the side and they was spray DDT and in turn around that actually was spray Agent Orange.

00;29;30;16 – 00;29;54;00

They would there was no cleaning the system out. And so all the Air Force crewmen were flying, those providers were exposed to it, and they overflow all of our area spraying either DDT or Agent Orange. And I have lost at least two of my water guys to age related diseases. And I say my fingers crossed. I've been very, very lucky.

00;29;54;02 – 00;30;13;02

I have so far. But yeah, George was a factor and you didn't even know it. You had no idea what it was. So would you say you were concerned at the time about Agent Orange exposure? No. Didn't know what? Didn't know about it. Didn't surface. It was a it was like a time bomb. It didn't service for many years after that.

00;30;14;17 – 00;30;20;13

What were some of the ways you coped with the war? With the war?

00;30;21;11 – 00;30;45;17

Even on my first tour, I nearly ten years in the Marine Corps, so I wasn't I wasn't very young at that point. I was had a more, I think, a more mature view of it. The first coping was to try and stay healthy. Second was try not to get shot. The third was to do your job the way you were trained to do it, and led to a higher level of worry about the strategy of it.

00;30;45;19 – 00;31;15;05

Off duty, you tried to socialize with the guys. You know, it was USO shows at the club in 1968, 69 were USO shows. Halfway through? No, no,

no, it was it would be December of 1968. I got a week of order and I chose to go to Sydney, Australia, rather than one of the other cities. So I had a week off from the war in a very, very civilized country, in a very civilized city.

00;31;15;08 – 00;31;31;13

So you can unwind with that. Basically, you simply do your job and lay down and rest when you can and do your job. It doesn't reverse your ability, and you just that's what you do.

00;31;31;15 – 00;31;57;08

What was the most memorable friendship you had during your time in Vietnam? The most memorable friendship. To this day, I live in normally. When I went back a second to where they had what they call Southeast Asia, these are wooden shacks with a tin roof and screens on the side. And that's where all the Graham Marines lived in the night.

00;31;57;10 – 00;32;23;16

The air crews lived in Quonset huts which were as wide as this room, probably and about twice as long, divided down the center and divided into quarters two officers to do a thing, because they had to be able to sleep in air conditioning, to be able to fly around the clock. So one of the officers, I was the first lieutenant at the time and one of the also was a captain named John LaRue.

00;32;23;19 – 00;32;48;01

And John said, this is your second tour moving with us. So he squeezed me into the small room where he was with another guy, and we were 18in apart and our two bunks. If I got male and he did not read my mail to him and vice versa. It's a very long story, but John, was on a mission on September 18th, 1968.

00;32;48;01 – 00;33;11;08

I had breakfast with him before he launched. He was shot down in North Vietnam. He and his actually were both killed at noon time. I was packing his gear. We were told not to contact their families because they were very upset. So ears and years and years went by. Now it's like 1990. And I found his mother up in Colorado.

00;33;11;10 – 00;33;31;29

His daughter, who was two years old at the time, was now 28 years old. I worked for Airbus at the time. I was putting the aircraft into Northwest Airlines, so I went down to to, Rochester, Minnesota, and met John's widow, who had remarried. And the daughter, my wife and I

went to their wedding to daughter's wedding.

00;33;32;02 - 00;33;52;23

We had him at my house in Virginia, and we were still in touch with him, Sean. Still very close to them. So that was the most memorable one. For sure. For sure. I mean, of all the ones, that's that one was a 25 year deal or 30 year deal and still ongoing. Thank you for sharing that.

00;33;52;26 - 00;34;21;12

What was the most beautiful thing you saw in Vietnam? Most beautiful, beautiful thing. It's a beautiful country if you leave it alone. It's a very tropical country. Very, very pretty. China Beach was it was very photogenic. And it's very highly commercialized and developed now was a resort. I think I might have mentioned it, there was a religious pilgrimage in 1965.

00;34;21;14 - 00;34;43;18

The statue of Our Lady of Panama was on a world tour. And when it came through Vietnam all the way from Saigon, all the way up and stopping all the way up the long line, it was under the care of the Army, the Republic of Vietnam. And you'll see pictures in the picture I gave you of three or 4 or 500 Vietnamese people at the at the airport is Fubar.

00;34;43;21 - 00;35;04;00

It was a statue was unloaded a bunch of priests, a bunch of nuns, a bunch of civilians, all Catholic. And the language in Vietnam was not Vietnamese or French or English. That day. It was Latin. And I still remember that. It was it was a highlight of my life. It was really quite something.

00;35;04;02 - 00;35;06;00

You mentioned letters earlier.

00;35;06;00 - 00;35;10;26

Who did you write to or receive letters from when you were in Vietnam?

00;35;10;26 - 00;35;35;00

Well, I was married at the time, you know. So in first 1965, I was writing to my wife, into my parents, 1968, 69, the same thing. But my children were too young to write to them directly. But I wrote to my wife and, I got occasional letters from other people other than my family, but but, you know, fairly rarely.

00;35;35;03 - 00;35;55;17

But it did. Talking about writing is is the issue. You wrote a letter. It took two, sometimes 2 to 3 weeks for that letter to get to the mainland and get delivered and for them to write a response to it. Maybe by the time you got a response, you forgot what you had written because you didn't keep copies.

00;35;55;20 - 00;36;14;07

The only other way to communicate was what they called Mars Military affiliate Radio System, and that was a deal where they used shortwave radio from Vietnam, from an operator in Vietnam to another operator somewhere in the United States. And they would patch it out to a phone line and you would talk. But it was one of these things you say, I love you over.

00;36;14;14 - 00;36;31;02

And they would say, I love you over. And there's four people on the call. And it was really compared to technology today, which is mind boggling. It was really primitive, maybe better than World War two, but still pretty primitive.

00;36;31;04 - 00;36;44;18

That's the end of my service. Questions. Is there another story we haven't talked about from your time in Vietnam that you'd like to share?

00;36;44;21 - 00;37;23;21

I think the yes, I think I would say is, no civilized person wants to take somebody else's life. And so when you go into into a wartime situation, that's what you do, and it can have a devastating effect afterwards. I it may not affect you immediately, but it will affect you down downrange. It doesn't matter whether you're infantry or whether you're in an aircraft truck, you know, striking about I remember being on operations where we would we would try our very, very best to take these people up, because if you didn't do it, they were coming after you.

00;37;23;28 - 00;37;48;01

So it became a self defense thought process. So that would that would be something I would I would think about more so the first time than the second time. The second thing I would think would be. How impressed I was with the infrastructure. I don't mean to be negative one is. Well, I'm trying hard not to be negative.

00;37;48;03 - 00;38;13;18

The Marine Corps travels like the Army does not. The Army had all the comforts of home, and they are a very, very large organization. They had tremendous assets and all kinds of Marine Corps, but not so much which we had to beg, borrow and steal for everything we needed. So every time we got an opportunity to interact with one of them, the Army, some, it was like going on vacation.

00;38;13;21 - 00;38;49;22

I mean, they had so much good stuff, a good situation. I mentioned before the about the exchanges, virtually everybody was over there. Had any money would go with the Army Air Force exchange at Danang, buy back amplifiers and sound systems and use speakers and and ship that stuff home. And it was like a rite of passage. And it was hard to comprehend that you're having some civilization at the same time you're being shot at in this course of 1965, not 2025, in Ukraine.

00;38;49;24 - 00;39;15;04

But it's a it's just a strange mental process to, to try to deal with the ying yang of it. The Marines not have access to the same as the Army, very primitive. But we had very, very Spartan stuff. Everything we had was, was, was hand-me-down, basically, all my comm gear was World War two and Korean vintage comm gear from the Army.

00;39;15;11 - 00;39;35;08

Army Signal Corps. Our jeeps were the same as the Army and stuff like that, but but as a general rule, we work on a much tighter budget than the other services do you get you get more bang for the buck in the Marine Corps. Thank you very much for for sharing all of that. This was a fantastic interview.

00;39;35;28 - 00;39;43;09

I'd like to move on now to your post-Vietnam life. What relationship in your life was most changed by your service?

00;39;43;09 - 00;39;57;14

My entire life was changed by the service because my second port of my military career was aviation support. So when I retired from the Marine Corps, I went into commercial aviation and I worked for the airlines for five years.

00;39;57;16 - 00;40;21;06

I worked for Ryder System and then third party supplier for five years. I worked for Airbus for six years, and I ran my own consulting company for 11 years in aviation consulting. So that flip of the coin going through OCS, changing me from being a communicator to an aviation support person, really set up an entire rest of my life.

00;40;21;08 - 00;40;44;17

And did your relationships with people around you change because of your service in Vietnam? Did the my relationship with any crew change with your family? With your friends? No, I'll tell you, but there's a there's an anecdotal story. When I came back from Vietnam in 1965, I went back to Philadelphia for the Christmas holiday before I went to OCS.

00;40;44;20 - 00;41;17;05

So I went to a Christmas party in the neighborhood. And I have my skin is dark because I've been exposed out, you know? You know, my hair was short, I was more reserved, more quiet, and everybody else was not. And, When they found out that I was a sergeant, the Marines, just came back from Vietnam. They all sort of backed up.

00;41;17;07 - 00;41;44;17

And it was I wasn't playing any kind of a role. I was just as you're seeing me today. But the people reacted to you differently. Not everybody was cordial. Some were, some were, some were. Some were pretty hostile. We talked about it yesterday and said, were you ever spit on? No, I wasn't, I was never treated badly on my coming back from Vietnam either time, whether I was fortunate, I don't know.

00;41;44;17 - 00;41;50;08

But I personally never experienced any of that stuff.

00;41;50;11 - 00;42;20;23

Did you know any antiwar veterans or any anti-war veterans? Not them. No. But I think now I think some of the guys that I knew then had become very much antiwar today. But they're in their 80s, their late 70s and are inner cities, and they they become very disenchanted with having politicians send you off to die and then not letting you win the war.

00;42;20;24 - 00;42;44;21

And we were not allowed to win the war. So we lost a lot of people, both killed and injured for political reasons, without being able to do what we were professionally trained to do. And you, we see it

today. We even see it today. So it's you don't want to lose family members for no good, for no good reason.

00;42;44;24 - 00;43;17;11

Would you say these people are anti-war in general or are they anti-Vietnam War? Good question. Today I think they're anti-war. No they're not either war in general. They're not. I think they're they are unhappy with either the support, for example, of Ukraine or the lack of support for Ukraine, depending on where they look at this thing in terms of global global security.

00;43;17;13 - 00;43;32;05

They're look at what goes on in Gaza based on their own personal influence. So I think that they're just they're just unhappy with the government's messed up methodology and doing things.

00;43;32;07 - 00;43;46;10

Who since the war have you talked to about Vietnam? I'm sorry to say it again. Who have you talked with since the war about your time in Vietnam,

00;43;46;12 - 00;44;15;22

You don't necessarily bring a subject up to to raise the issue, but there's an enormous amount of people, especially in the last year, who will come up to you proactively and say thank you for your service. And my response invariably has been, it was an honor and a privilege. And I amended that recently by saying, look the person in the eye and say you were worth it.

00;44;15;25 - 00;44;38;26

Because there's more people that seem to be concerned about the way you were treated coming back, and more willing to try to reach out to you. There are probably people who are on the liberal side that are anti-war that we wouldn't have very much to talk about, but they're entitled to their opinion because everybody is entitled to their opinion.

00;44;38;29 - 00;45;05;00

Good. Bitter. Indifferent. I don't push it. But if I'm asked a question, as I am in this session here, I'll try to answer the question as factually as I can without embellishment. There's a there's a lot of stories. There's an enormous amount of stories that have take you forever to go through them, because each picture would evoke a memory, and you'd be able to talk about why you where you were

when you took the picture and what was sort of circumstances of it.

00;45;05;03 - 00;45;35;02

But again, my family, almost all my family knows I was in Vietnam, but you never talk to them about it. Occasionally one of my grandsons will ask me, and I've got one grandson who was for, you know, a former marine, and he's an oral do an oral history interviews, and, he knows more about the Marine Corps than the average person does because he got a dozen years of experience with it now, military and civilian.

00;45;35;05 - 00;45;59;09

But everybody else is anecdotal. I mean, they really don't know. And unless you're sitting in a room, as we are right now talking, it doesn't get communicated very well by phone or by any other means. You really needs to be eyeball to eyeball conversation to talk about it and share the stories.

00;45;59;11 - 00;46;18;08

Well, we're we're happy to have you here and thank you for sharing these stories. I'm honored to be asked to do it. And, I appreciate what you are doing to perpetuate the memories of this thing. I think it's, and I think it's a target of opportunity because you all the people that you're trying to reach out to are aging out.

00;46;18;10 - 00;46;38;05

And their ability to be able to recall this in enough detail to be useful is hard. So I think when you when you have the opportunity to do it, you really you really should do it. Thank you for doing it. Well we have we have three questions left. So thank you very much for for your answers up to this point.

00;46;38;29 - 00;46;40;17

Have you been to the wall in DC?

00;46;40;17 - 00;47;04;11

I have, and what do you think of it? Since I know a number of names, what do I think? Very highly, but I think it was I think the lady who designed it was ahead of her time. I think it was highly resisted. And all of a sudden it's been greatly accepted and is I mentioned John Lewis to a writer, John Wall, whose daughter and her fiance at the wall and left him there when I went and found a participation on Constitution Avenue.

00;47;04;11 - 00;47;22;18

By the time I wrote down her, she had tears in her eyes and she said, and I quote so many names, it is so. It was an overwhelming thing for someone to see, especially if it's a family on that wall.

00;47;22;20 – 00;47;38;17

Why do you think it's been more accepted over time than when it was initially constructed? Why do you think that the opinion about the wall has changed over time?

00;47;38;19 – 00;48;09;09

I'm not a I'm not a high level strategic thinker planner, you know, on a global basis on the very practical common sense type of person. Nobody in their right mind ever wants to go to war because the, the down word effects of this thing last forever. Losing a child in a traffic accident stays with you forever.

00;48;09;09 – 00;48;36;18

Losing a family member in a combat situation, whether the remains recovered or not recovered, whether viewable or not viewable, less was lost to family forever. So nobody wants to go to war. However. You really have to look at the threat assessment, because a lot of people in other countries don't quite feel that way, and they will waste human lives in the thousands to accomplish their goal.

00;48;36;20 – 00;48;41;18

Where we try not to, we try not to lose anybody. They don't care about losing people.

00;48;42;13 – 00;48;44;05

Have you been back to Vietnam?

00;48;44;05 – 00;49;07;00

Have I been back? No. And a lot of people have innocent historical tours that go back. And I know people have gone back. My one of my daughters in law is Vietnamese. She's Vietnamese American. She was born in this country, but her parents escaped in the boatlift. So. And she has been back to Vietnam with her sisters a couple times.

00;49;07;03 – 00;49;32;28

I don't have a desire to go back to Vietnam because everything that I would would know is not there anymore. Danang is not there as I know her case on is not there as I knew it to be is not. Here is a new it.

It's a totally different geography and it would would mean anything. I think it's unusual that we are having a lot of a product made in Vietnam.

00;49;33;01 - 00;49;53;18

You know, if you look at your clothes and says, made in Vietnam, we're dealing with a communist country making product for us. Is that good? Yeah. It gives them something to do. If you look at the number of people that are popular in a country like Vietnam or China, for example, and, and they have nothing to do, there's all kinds of mischief that happens.

00;49;53;21 - 00;50;13;00

The more you can keep them gainfully employed and the more you have international solid links like that, the less chance that you're going to get into a fighting war with them. So yes, I but I know I have no desire to go back. I'm too old to go back. I can't I can't do, a 14 hour different time zone easily.

00;50;13;02 - 00;50;15;18

You know.

00;50;15;21 - 00;50;43;09

Well, this is my last question. Do you have a favorite book, poem or movie about Vietnam? Well. I can't give you some of the titles, but Karl Marlantes is an author that you might look at. His book is well worth reading. There are any number of them. And by the way, I will offer you an opportunity to come to my house and take a look at my library of books.

00;50;43;09 - 00;51;09;13

You're welcome to to even take some of them, because they're sitting there ready for use. Poems? Not so much. I'm not a poetry kind of guy. There are some really bad movies from Vietnam that are there are Hollywood generated, but they're not anywhere near reality. And they do a disservice to a lot of people.

00;51;09;15 - 00;51;30;08

They don't try to service because people believe what they see on the screen or what they hear, not what is real. And, and very few people are willing to go do the research required to find out what the truth really is. So I'm not I'm not a fan. I watch some of them, but I sometimes my teeth are gritted because they are so bad.

00;51;30;11 – 00;51;43;25

Do you have at least favorite Vietnam movie? I'm sorry. Do you have a least favorite Vietnam movie? Yeah, Apocalypse Now is up there with one of them. What was the other one?

00;51;43;27 – 00;52;10;00

The woman, Lee Ermey or Lee Emery was. It was, I can't remember the title of it, but it was. And I say it was a two part movie. The first part was Marine Boot Camp, which was very realistic, very realistic to what I went through. The second part was Vietnam, which was not realistic. Okay. But but, there's a lot of them out there, but, you know, there's a lot of good stuff out there, too.

00;52;10;00 – 00;52;19;17

The movie I'm not familiar with that doesn't does not. But you know that full metal jacket. Full metal jacket. Yep,