

Interviewer: Eric Jones

Interviewee: Jim Roehm

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Topic: Effects of the Vietnam War on Hillsboro

E: What was your life like before the war?

J: I was a college student, we'll say that I was on the athletic teams that always won and I was used to winning, very few losing teams. I had good grades in school. I was in ROTC; after my sixth year I had to graduate because what had happened was when I was a senior there was a war in Laos, Vietnam that was a guerilla war that we seemed to be getting involved in. I had already joined the infantry in ROTC so I thought that maybe if I went to grad school it would be over by the time I got out. So I got a years defamatory they called it and another one because it wasn't over and then the Army said that your not staying in school any longer. So just entered the Army and that's when I went to war.

E: Did the Draft Laws affect you at all?

J: Yeah, the only reason that I joined the ROTC, well there were a couple of them. One was, all my friends were, but you had to deal with the Draft somehow. It's so hard to relate to now because it is a volunteer service, but then it wasn't and so there was a draft even though we weren't in a war and you had to deal with it. Depending on the size of the community you come from, I came from Seaside which was a small county so they had a pretty high quota depending on how many people lived there so you're probably going to get drafted if you are not married or working for some defense administration or something like that. So everybody either joined the National Guard or the ROTC or they did something. I went into the ROTC because I didn't want to be a private even though there wasn't a war going on and then in my college years there was the Gulf of Tonkin incident it was my first year in grad school and by the time I entered the Army they were sending units.

E: How did you feel about going into the war?

J: Well you know, I grew up, I was a little kid during the Second World War, and so I really expected to go to war. All my life I expected there to be another war and that I would have to go, because everybody went in the Second World War unless they were too old or blind; there were very few people who didn't go, or men I mean. So it didn't really phase me, I went into the Army, I was stationed in Texas, and there were units over in Vietnam, two big ones, and I pretty much expected since I was an infantry officer that I would be called and about nine months after my interactive duty I got a call on the phone from the Army office saying your orders are here. I really excited about it because that was what I had been trained to do. It really didn't depress me I wasn't happy about possibly dying or being wounded or anything like that, but I was still excited. Just doing what I was trained to do instead of sitting around Texas and do nothing.

E: What was the trip to Vietnam like?

J: Well, I went to Panama first and was trained in jungle warfare. Everybody that was in a combat unit, E-7 and above had to go to Panama, then I came home for thirty days on leave and it was like a twenty-one hour flight with no windows in a plane you know like seventeen hours to Wake Island and another few hours to the Philipines. It just likes were kind of cargo, most guys were asleep and I went up to the flight deck and sat around with the pilots; it was kind of cool, couldn't see anything-we were flying over the ocean. It was just a bunch of water and clouds.

E: While in Vietnam did you receive any gifts or packages from your hometown?

J: While I was there I wrote to people I didn't know, I had names given to me of girls back home. So I wrote lots of letters whenever I had a chance and just like a page you know real fast. So I got lots of letters; every letter I got from my brother had a package of kool-aid in it, because I was out in the jungle the whole time the whole year, the water was just undrinkable because it had halo zones in it; it killed all of the bacteria and protozoa so you would put kool-aid in it. I got packages at Christmas from my family that was it. And soap.

Home
Front
Support

E: Do you have any interesting stories to tell?

J: I got lots of them, but I don't really tell them. War stories embarrass me and the stories that I have to tell are like people tell at cocktail parties and they start talking about accidents on the freeway and they start one-upping each other well if you are sitting there at a party like that what are you supposed to do; there is not time or situation where you would want to tell those stories. It's pretty embarrassing stuff because most of the time when you hear somebody tell a war story it's a fabrication or at best it has been embellished on over the years. I really haven't talked about it for twenty-five years; there were a few humorous things that happened I am glad to tell people them.

E: What was it like returning home from the war?

J: Well that was really interesting because most of the officers in the infantry units were rotated out of the field, like six months in the field and then they would be put in some other outfit. I was just left out there, I think they needed somebody to become the new officer and actually new what was going on. I was never going to become company commander because I was never going to achieve a high enough rank I mean I was only over there for two years. So I just stayed out there, I was platoon leader for most of the time and then I became executive officer of the company. By the time it was time for me to rotate back home I had diarrhea, I was sick, I couldn't sleep at night because I had heard so many stories about people getting killed the day they are supposed to leave the field. That certainly would have been hard to take. So at the very end when I was ready to leave the field I was in pretty bad shape just because I was so worked up about it. Two or three weeks later...I was home. Actually it was Oakland; you fly in to Travis Air Force base, which is right outside of Oakland, California, go into a room and sit down with a bunch of other guys and a representative from the Veterans gives you an

orientation of what it's like to not be in the Army because I got out of the Army the minute I got back home; that's when my troop duty was magically up. And so we walked out of that room and I had my uniform on, I walked out on the streets of Oakland, I think they bused us out there and I remember walking and thinking this is too strange, people were looking at me, there was no eye contact at all. I felt really weird and so I got back to the hotel took the uniform off and put my civies on of which I had like one pair of pants and one shirt that had been somewhere in a bag for a year. It was weird you know, just a couple of days ago I was actually in the jungle and we were hauling dead bodies out from where we were in cargo nets in Chinook Helicopters, cargo nets full of dead bodies, and a couple of days later I was walking down the streets of Oakland and it was like nothing was going on; it was really hard to adjust to, because it's like there is nothing happening in San Francisco and Oakland-those places are just normal, but over there its like you're in a different universe not a different world, just a completely different universe; the paradigms are really different. In Oakland if somebody came out and shot you they would be arrested and put away for the rest of their life, but in this other universe somebody could come out and shoot you and be given a medal for it they would hailed as a hero. So it is a real different field. I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but that changes everything when you come back home and to be walking down the street or in a restaurant and to have normal activity going on, people behaving as they normally would is kind of odd. In the Second World War they brought units over in mass and left them there saying you're going to be here until the was is over or until you are wounded or killed and then they brought them back in mass so you know the whole unit comes back and everybody has a parade and everybody's happy, but in the Vietnam War and I think the Korean War too people rotated, you put in one unit and took one. It was staggered because their tours ended at different times and so there was one Boeing-747 full of GI's coming home everyday...people get kind of used to that it isn't the same. There is no way that you could honor people as they returned there is just no way to do it, even if Americans wanted to do it. You would have to have a band and a parade that was standing there in Oakland everyday. Everything's normal. It's like nothing's happening. When you hear people talk about the Vietnam War it was on TV every night and people became very upset by it and angered by it. I didn't see it that way, yeah it was on TV every night just like now you turn on the TV and you see a couple car accidents-you get pretty used to it; I think people were just used to it. There were some people that were very upset about it, but to be honest with you not in Hillsboro. It was a pretty conservative place, it was more conservative then. There wasn't really anybody around that was screaming or yelling in Hillsboro except maybe Jack Kirkwood-he was really extreme and he was really a lone voice out there and he was the only one. Anytime the newspaper came out there would be a letter to the editor by Jack and that would be it. In my memory it wasn't really pervasive at all, nobody seemed to care.

Veterans

E: How do you think people felt about you as a Vietnam War Veteran?

J: People my age, who had grown up, the first five years of my life there was a war going on. I think people my age felt like shaking my hand, but they didn't. People younger than me that had, say were born from like 1945 on, were the baby boomers felt like they had a choice, which I didn't. If I was given a choice, I wouldn't have chose to do that,

there was no reason to do it. I can't understand why anybody would join the Army with the purpose of going to war in Vietnam, wherever that is. Really nobody even knew where it was back then. It could have been in Australia, it could have been on the North Pole, people didn't know where it was. I knew there was an area of the world called Indochina because the French had been having problems there for years, but I wasn't really sure where it was. I would have never volunteered to go help those people to fight communism. I didn't care about communism; it didn't make any difference to me. Nobody could have convinced me that America would be taken over by a form of government. So there was really no sale there, but still I think that those people thought that I was just stupid, because they felt that they had the option. They could burn their draft card, they could not go.

E: Do you think that played any part in you getting a job once you came back?

J: No, the fact that I was a vet. You would have to ask the people that hired me. For one thing, when I think back they were scrambling for teachers. Teachers were in short supply and there were lots of jobs. I remember I didn't even think about working when I got back. I kind of just said the heck with it and I'm not going to do anything. I did my part and now I am just going to sit back. After a while my dad got tired of paying the bills and said you got to go to work and this was like August 20th and I was trained to be a teacher. It was a little late to be looking for job where schools all start hiring the first week of August. I activated my file and had them sent out to schools that needed teachers. It was easy to get a job.

E: Did the students that you taught know?

J: I think that they thought it was neat. They knew. Sometimes they would ask questions about it. I think that the students I taught thought that it didn't involve them and really it didn't. I started teaching 16 year-olds in 1968 and the last ground combat units were out of there in '71. So three years, it really didn't involve them and for them it was a pretty detached deal. You know how teenagers are, they think about today, they think about the dance tonight and nobody has changed that is the way that teenagers have always been. They don't think that if we're not out of there in three years I might be there myself. I don't think that they really connected to it.

E: And so did the students become rebellious toward the draft or the war?

J: Students don't think of themselves being any less rebellious now, but they are much less than they were then. A large factor was the war, they thought that it was okay to scream and yell at any authority. In my classroom they were just like any other kids. People started dressing down to go to work and eventually the teachers started looking like the kids and that was unheard of prior to that. The world changed in 1968-69.

Schools

E: Did the kinds of music that people were listening to change at all?

J: The music that I listened to changed. Actually it started changing prior to my coming back, but I would say that there was a big folk music wave in the sixties and it got electrified and moved into the pop music scene. Folk music had always been the people's music and the lyrics were different. They were no longer about teen love, they were about standing up for yourself and anti-war.

E: Were the teaching about the war?

J: Yes. Certainly Mr. Kirkwood was.

E: Did they have a moratorium at your school?

J: Nope.

E: Is there anything else that you would like to add that I have not already asked about?

J: You have actually done a pretty good job. The war's effect on this community, I don't think that it involved a lot of young men from Hillsboro. I felt like a lone wolf. I was the only one I knew out here and I didn't know anybody who had been in the war. I bet you are having a hard time finding veterans in this area and that is because this was a very conservative community. There was not a lot of anti-war here either. People back then were just more in line with what's going on by the very nature of who they are. I have always felt this way, that I didn't really find out about the war until I got home and started watching the news and getting a more broad viewpoint.

E: Thank you very much.

J: You're welcome.