

Interview with Robert and Marilyn Senko conducted by Levi Huynh
Robert Senko was a captain who won the Silver Star for a mission to rescue POWs in
North Vietnam. He lived in Hillsboro prior to the war.

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LH: Mr. Senko can you tell me about your background the war in Vietnam? Where you lived, your family situation and your life in Hillsboro?

RS: I grew up on 1265 East Oak Street, so right in town basically. Dad ran the Birds Eye food processing plant there, and there were nine of us children. I was the seventh of nine. We all went to Saint Matthews grade school, went off to various Catholic high schools. All of us went either to Columbia prep or...I went to Jesuit. And the girls all went to St. Mary's of the Valley. That's where I grew up. We lived in town, but I worked on the farm a lot while I was growing up.

LH: Hillsboro was pretty much a farming community?

RS: Yeah it was pretty... You know, the center of town had other things, but generally the Birdseye plant was the big industry, so all the farmers bought stuff into the plant to process.

LH: [to Marilyn] Did you grow up in Hillsboro also?

MS: No, I grew up in central Oregon in a little town called Antelope, where I grew up on top of a ranch. I was one of seven children and we met at the University of Portland where we went to college.

LH: So how did you wind up in the Air Force? Was it draft or volunteer?

RS: No actually I went to the University of Portland and took Air Force ROTC on purpose. I wanted to fly jet airplanes in the Air Force. So I went to the Air Force on purpose, it was kind of what I wanted to be when I grew up.

LH: Was this before the Vietnam War?

RS: Yeah, I graduated from college in '64, and got my pilot's, Air Force pilot's wings in the fall of '65. So Vietnam had not really started. Although at that point, most of us volunteered to go over there.

LH: So most people were volunteering?

RS: Uh, I'd say probably 50% were volunteers and the other 50% were pilots. And the other 50% probably looked for assignments that wouldn't necessarily put them in combat. But I'd say about 50%.

LH: What was the drafting process?

RS: Well, I didn't get drafted, you know, I was volunteer. I don't really know too much about the draft. Marilyn's brother was drafted. Little brother.

MS: Uh huh, he went into the army, and he was drafted when he was about 20. Uh, other friends weren't drafted. Many of them went into the reserves. But he did six months of active duty and then they did reserve programs and they couldn't be called up. They went to weekend meetings once a month or something, for maybe 2 or 3 years and that was say the time frame that we were in college or just before...

RS: Yeah but see, Vietnam hadn't started, they weren't drafting. They were drafting, but it wasn't for war. They were just filling their quotas. But people still went to college to avoid the draft. They got married and had children to avoid the draft. And I think after Vietnam started, a lot of people started doing that. You know, getting into college, number one, and while they were in college they'd be deferred, they didn't have to go. And then they would hope that they would get too old...[laughs] while they were in college, and they wouldn't have to go. But...

MS: It was a fact of life for a lot of young guys though. And my brother who was five years younger than I, went when he was 20.

RS: And that would have been about '67, '68 time range.

LH: How much did you know about the war before you went there?

RS: Uh, *not very much* to be very honest with you. Um, there wasn't a whole lot being said about what we were there...you know *exactly why* we were there and all that kind of stuff. We always just thought that you know, the poor Vietnamese were being overrun by communists and we needed to go over and help them, get rid of the communists. Um, I think we've learned a lot more about it *since* then. And know a lot more about what was going on. We thought we were saving the Vietnamese from the godless communists. [laughs]. So that was our duty to help them, if they wanted a democratic government, we were supposed to help them get that. So that's why we helped them.

LH: This question is for both of you, from your recollections, was the war a topic of interest in Hillsboro at the time you went? Like in newspaper, conversations, the general consensus?

MS: I think that it was pretty well. By the time Bob went in 1970, it was on the news it was on the TV, and it was the beginning of anti-war media all the time. We of course, Bob had a career, and that's what he wanted to do, fly fire planes, and that was his mission, that what he was trained for. And if he was to go forward in the Air Force, he needed to participate in that. There was never any question. I had a sister that was in the Army, and I remember that among her friends there was a lot of anti-war [sentiment], [like] why would you do that? I think typical farming communities here, and where I

grew up, its pretty much you fight for your country, you do your part. So I don't think there was a lot of anti [war sentiment] within our personal communities.

RS: Marilyn's brother was a Catholic priest and he was principal of a Catholic high school in Portland, and he was helping anybody who wanted to get out of the draft, escape to Canada, whatever it took. He was really anti war. I think he was just anti war no matter what the war. And he thought that those kids going to war would be maimed or killed. So that was going on, that was actually going on when I went over. So my brother was already involved in the anti-war movement.

MS: Where there was a lot of anti-war at the colleges at that time. And Bob had a brother, and maybe a brother in law too at that time frame, down in the University of Oregon getting their masters and doctor degrees at the University of Oregon, and they mentioned that, that you know, you don't wear your uniform on campus.

LH: Were there any extremist groups that were influential at the time?

RS: No. Not that we know of.

MS: I don't think there was a lot of anti-war in Hillsboro, certainly not that we ran into.

RS: We weren't here all that much, because we were down in Arizona, you know that's where I worked.

MS: Bob worked from here we didn't live here. I came back and lived where I grew up, while he was gone. And we did spend some time, because his dad died in that time frame, and his mother was ill, so we did spend some time in Hillsboro, but it was really family orientated.

RS: Well I don't remember seeing or hearing anything very exciting. [laughs]

LH: That's important to know actually, when we were looking through the *Argus*, there wasn't a lot of talk about the war. It was mostly about the economy and inflation...

RS: Yes! And I think just this article coming out right at the height of the anti Vietnam sentiment, indicates that the *Argus* is still patriotic. It's a hometown thing. I have a feeling that Hillsboro just didn't see the thing like you might have seen at Reed College at the same time.

LH: What was your job in Vietnam?

RS: I flew A1's, it was a sky raider, that's it right there, the bottom right picture. What we used before was close air supporter, the one on the top, right there. Close air support, search and rescue. Specifically our job was to find downed flyers, and protect them until we could get helicopters in to bring them up and bring them home. We also did escort and long range infield missions into...now I can tell you...into Laos and Cambodia. But

it flies real slow but its got lots of loiter time, and when we drop something on the bad guys, it hits the bad guys...almost every time. Pretty good, pretty good airplanes.

LH: Can you tell me about your experience which led to receiving your silver star?

RS: Well that was, specifically that mission was to raid into North Vietnam and try and release prisoners from prisoner war camp. They had found a camp that was about 22 miles from Hanoi, that was pretty isolated, far enough away from the mainstream that they thought we could sneak in, get in there, get our guys and get out without getting caught at it. So had they set this mission up and they got a bunch of us back, I actually came back from Vietnam and trained in Florida for almost two months. And we trained the whole thing, all the helicopters, all the support air planes, the guys who were going to get on the ground, the commandos, and we trained and trained, we did it and did it and did it, until we had it down to a size. And they picked a night and off we are to the mission. We actually did fly right down, to where we were supposed to go, we put the guys in the ground, they needed to search the ground. There weren't any prisoners there, they moved them out, actually almost two months before. But uh, we got in, we got out, all the injury we had was one of the helicopter guys, when we landed, it kind of twisted, he'd gotten thrown out and twisted a leg. But other than that...

MS: There was an F105 wasn't it?

RS: Oh, and we lost an airplane, but [laughs] they lost it all the time. [laughs]

MS: But they picked it up.

RS: Yeah.

RS: It was a highly successful execution of a mission, but not a very successful result of a mission. Which is unfortunate. We in fact just last fall went to the 30th reunion of the crowd that pulled that mission off, down in Florida. And the guys that were supposed to be there that weren't. [laughs]

LH: What is your opinion about why we weren't successful with the war in Vietnam?

RS: Well we never had a clear focus about what we wanted to do. Several times if we had prosecuted the end of the war, we could have gotten Hanoi to quit. We just needed...either you had to do it, or get out, and we just never figured out. We did a little, then we'd pull back, we just never appeared to have the will to get the job done. The difference between Vietnam and Desert Storm is patently obvious, we went over there, we decided what we were going to do, and we did it. Everything until that was done, you can see what we can do if we put our minds to it. The politicians got involved, the politicians, literally the President were selecting the air targets, not the military. The President [didn't just] tell us, go out and win the battle. He said, go fight the battle *just like this*. And so our guys, you know our hands were tied, we couldn't win them. Then they would stop bombing, let the North build everything back up again, and then we'd

start bombing again, then they would have all their missiles and so. And on the ground it was really the same kind of thing. We had to decide whether we were going to just go on the ground and do it ourselves or turn it over to the South Vietnamese to do. And we kept vacillating back and forth. Yeah we'd fight, "no its not really our job, its really their job, we're here to help, we're not supposed to be doing that", so we back off. And the other thing is, the Vietcong were very very clever with how they used the people. When you talked about the rural people in Hillsboro, the rural people in Vietnam, people with guns walk into town, "okay, guess we're on your side now", when those guys leave, and the other guys with guns [come], "okay, we're on your side now". You know, you can understand that. Why would you fight the Vietcong? What would you have to gain to fight the Vietcong? You don't have anything to gain. You know, in fact as soon you start fighting, they shoot you or your kids, or your mother...you know those kind of stuff...and for what? So you can get more rice? So I mean, because of that, the Vietcong were clever with how they used the Vietnamese people. And it made it very, very difficult. And some of the atrocity things that you hear about are because it was hard to tell who was a combatant and who wasn't. So it was real hard. But you're back to the basic question, why were we there. In hindsight nobody really knows [laughs]. The President you know...*several* presidents got us into that war, and kept us into that war for reasons that *I* don't think we'll ever figure out.

LH: How were you received when you returned from the war?

RS: Well some places pretty well [laughs, gestures to *Argus* article]. Other places not so well. I came back from Vietnam and went to the University of Arizona, to get a graduate degree. Uh, we did *not* wear our uniforms on campus. Those that *knew* we were military, always you know, would curse at us and that kind of stuff. One day I had to wear my uniform, for some reason somebody decided that we should have a commander's call, where everybody comes in, in uniform. I got spit on walking on campus.

LH: This is Arizona?

RS: The University of Arizona.

LH: Why did you decide to go to Arizona?

RS: The Air Force sent me there. I think that would have happened on any campus in America, except maybe the University of Portland, I'll bet you that wouldn't have happened.

LH: Why not there?

RS: Because they were still pretty...first of all, they had an Air Force ROTC program that was still mandatory. Which meant that all of the freshmen and sophomores [males] had to be in the ROTC programs. So they wore all uniforms at least one day a week. It's

just a different attitude I would think, but I'm sure there was anti-war sentiment, its just that they wouldn't spit on the guys there [laughs].

LH: So Hillsboro was a lot more patriotic than the rest of the country?

RS: Well I would say so...

MS: I would say it was a typical rural farming community, and that had something to do with the reason it was, patriotic. Because farmers tend to be that way, they just...you know, you pay your dues, you serve your country, and that's just a mindset to a great extent. And Hillsboro certainly fell into that. I mean, how big was Hillsboro back then?

RS: When I left it was ten thousand.

MS: When Bob grew up on 12th and Oak...

RS: I was actually out of the city, 12 Street was the edge of the city when I was a small kid. But the point is also that you think if Hillsboro as Intel, and those kind of things, [but none of those was there]. In fact even at the end of the war, I don't believe any of that had started. Cause you know, computer chips...

MS: Tektronix had started.

RS: Textronix was out there making the oscilloscopes, so that was the high tech. Basically what you see is all the high tech stuff and the different people that are there because of it. You know, there are a lot more non-rural folks that are out there now.

LH: So you don't recall that there were any evidences that the attitudes of people had changed by the time you returned?

RS: Oh, I would say in general, people were tired of the war, even in 1970. When I came home in the Christmas of '70 people were tired of the war. People were questioning why we kept on sending people over there, it didn't seem like we were having a clear purpose of why we were there. So they may not have been anti war but they were certainly against continuing without something to do with it. I wouldn't say vehement about it...but they were starting to question why we were over there probably. And I would say that even Hillsboro, even little rural Hillsboro, had that sentiment. I'm sure my folks were asking that question, my brothers certainly were.

LH: Was there any affect at all on the economy, or did anything change because of the war, in Hillsboro?

RS: Well, I can't imagine what it was. I wouldn't think so because we weren't an industry based town where if we made tanks, guns, or something like that. We didn't make bombs or bullets, we didn't make foods...maybe we did make a little bit more food. I don't think so.

LH: This is for Marilyn. What was it like for you when Mr. Senko was gone, did the community support you while he was away?

MS: Well, like I said we both had a large family, so we had a huge family support group. And you know everyone in the family was very supportive. Other than that, he still was supportive of us, he just wasn't supportive of the war was his brother who was a priest. But I lived at my parents' ranch that year, and I was expecting our third child, and I had three little ones, who was born while Bob was gone. And you know we received regular mail, and I went to Florida with him for two months, when he was training down there. So I never saw anything but...no one was ever anything but supportive of me. And I *lived* within a farming community that year that I was there too, when I wasn't in Hillsboro. I was in a much more rural area.

RS: And you know, I'd say, the same thing was true of Antelope, or that whole country side out there. War, the boys were having to go to war...it was just kind of...that's facts of life. It wasn't something that you screamed and hollered about, you just went about life and accepted it.

MS: We were very accepting then by comparison to what we are now. I think part of it is because, you know *everything* is covered on TV now, *everything* is analyzed, *everything* is discussed, and everything is in the papers. And really that's...it was very different the Vietnam War versus Desert Storm. We watched Desert Storm on T.V. and that really wasn't true of Vietnam. Much of Vietnam, I think you knew a lot more after that.

RS: Well, and the other thing is Vietnam *caused* people to ask questions that they never asked before. All the wars before then, there was a clear reason, why we had gone. Korea, here came the Chinese across the border.

MS: That was an undeclared war

RS: None the less, you could see, [when] we'd gotten into the war, the North Koreans already had swept way far south, all the way down to Pusan. We got there, we pushed them back, and then the Chinese came and you know that was a regular war. Everybody understood, "okay yeah, those poor south Koreans are being over run by communists, go help them". But Vietnam, that's what we *thought* we were going there to do, but pretty soon it was pretty obvious that wasn't what was going on at all. And then the government that we were trying to keep in power was corrupt and actually worse than the communists. So then the bottom line is why are we doing this. What's our purpose, why are we here? *Because* we started asking those questions then, from then on we couldn't get into *anything*, the military couldn't get into anything without everybody asking questions. "Why are we doing this, what's going on?" Panama, Granada, you know, everything we do...a lot more questioning now. That wasn't true...

LH: This maybe kind of repetitive but would you say that the local T.V. news coverage wasn't very clear about what was going on in Vietnam? Do you recall anything about the TV news coverage while you were here?

RS: Well you know it's interesting...I think you know it was just like the body count stuff. Today we killed this many godless communists, and we have this many injuries, MIA, KIA kind of things...But no, I don't remember there being a whole lot. Of course I'm talking about Arizona, you know the war started really spinning up, until I went I was in Arizona, so... I don't know what television had up here very much.

LH: Is there anything else that you would like to add that I haven't asked?

RS: Um, well one thing is that you know Vietnam is a beautiful, beautiful country. I actually was stationed in Da Nang for about 2, 3 months, and flew over a lot of Vietnam. [locations fill in]. Really, really is a beautiful country. You get back away from the coastline, and there are beautiful streams, mountains and stuff and it was a real shame that we were messing it up so bad. I hope the Vietnamese are reclaiming it and making it as pretty as it was before.

LH: I just asked Mr. Senko is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked yet.

MS: One thing he didn't mention, about the mission that he was over there...well maybe this isn't what you're directing your questions at was that it was significantly successful in the fact that it raised morale. The POWs knew there was someone that cared and were trying to get them out. That was the success of that mission.

RS: Well, also, it scared the North Vietnamese into taking them out of isolation, putting them into bigger groups, putting them all into several prisons take {} and that gave them a chance to talk. So now, they were in bigger groups, they could talk and they were able to do a lot more and morale was a lot better. Cause you got to remember that we were there in the fall of '70, they still didn't come home until '73, so they were there for a couple more years. But they were better years.