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Branch of Service: Army

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Interviewed by: Chris Knight

I chose to get drafted because I wasn't sure of the issues, and I could see negative ramifications way out for a long time to come, the pros and cons of it were not clear enough in my mind, and certainly not so much in the favor of dodging it that it seemed like a smart thing to do. Plus, I had a natural curiosity to see what was going on. I was assigned to Chemical school and didn't even know what it was. When they started asking questions like, "Would you rather go pick flowers or go play football?", I thought, "Football, that's the infantry!" I knew what they were doing, so consequently...I'd have to admit I'd lied.

Boot camp was more annoying than difficult. The people in charge generally weren't very bright. There was a lot of stupidity. Chemical school was better than basic training. The thought of the people in charge was that soldiers there had some aptitude...which wasn't correct. There were a whole range of people there including some illiterates. They actually let married people live off post during advanced training, which I don't think anybody else got to do in the whole Army. I was married, and Lyla and I lived off post, and I'd come into base each morning, and each night I'd go home. We'd been married two years when I was drafted. My son Travis was born when I was in Vietnam. Vietnam doesn't have any resounding

effects on me now and part of it is, I'm different from most people who served, most people who served were 19 year-old kids. At 19 you can get messed up. But, when I was there, I turned 25. I'd been married for two years. I had a masters degree from Stanford University. I had taught for a year. I'd done a lot of stuff. Basically, in Vietnam I was an old man, and the war didn't effect me as much. Plus I didn't have a lot of the gore and other crappy stuff that some of the other guys had.

I arrived at (Bien Hoa?), the headquarters of our Army in Vietnam, in the middle of the night, and there was kind of a stench, a tropical smell, and it was hot and humid. Everything looked different...it sounded different. When I came in I was unassigned, and they put me into a replacement depot until they assigned me to somewhere. After about two days in the depot, I was assigned to 4th infantry division, somewhere in the central highlands. My job title was Chemical Operations Plotter. The job description on paper said that in the event of deployment of biological, chemical or radiological weapons, I was to plot the downwind hazards see about its effect on occupied terrain, troops movement, that sort of thing. In reality, I never did that job after training. Most of the time I was in base camp or in the helicopter, or literally on the road in convoys. In preparation for artillery strikes, we would fly over and drop teargas on people, then moments later the artillery would come in after people had been incapacitated. We also used defoliants around perimeters of base camps in areas called "free-fire zones" where it was assumed anybody there was up to no good so we could kill them. Every 25 missions, they routinely awarded you an air medal. I had 78 missions, so

I got three, which isn't a record. One of the guys I knew had 45 or 50 medals. Combat experience was really sporadic. It was wherever and whenever, I'd compare it to drive by shootings. The only ground combat I saw was when our convoy got ambushed once. I didn't even see who I was shooting at. There were some casualties in my unit, not a high amount, certainly not like the grunts had. Out of twenty or so people in my unit when I was there, one was killed and two or three were injured. I was injured when we were setting up a munitions demonstrations: when I was a Sergeant in charge, a Captain had me do something the wrong way and a flame land mine which is supposed to go that way went this way. They had me set it off and suddenly I saw this wall of flame coming, so I was injured and I ultimately lost a tooth because of it.

The Sergeants generally were terrific. They weren't always the smartest people in the world, but they ran things and they generally knew what was going on. There is a difference between smart and competent: they weren't all that bright but they were competent. The officers tended to be brighter, but with few exceptions they were self-serving, didn't care much about their troops, and were just in it for themselves. I heard a captain say, "Gee, I wanna be a Major, and this is the only war we got, so here I am". A number of our officers would put themselves in for medals and would get them, but we were in there at the same time and they didn't put us in for it. That is a theme in Vietnam: self-serving. I know firsthand of instances in which officers were willing to trade the lives of their troops, and if not their lives, then their safety if that would make them look good. Church was on

Sunday, but I found that the ministers there were a bunch of dog-gone lifers who told us to go out and die for our country...and that didn't seem like Christianity to me, so I only went like once or twice.

To communicate with my family I wrote letters. We got envelopes and in place of a stamp we would write "free" and place it in the mailbox. And that was it. We were told, because there was a certain amount of low-grade intelligence in the letters--I don't mean smartness I mean information-- they said don't leave your letters lying around and don't just throw them away because who knows who gets them. At first I started burning the letters my wife sent me, but then I thought, no, no, I want to keep these, and when writing to my wife, I'd include the letters she had previously sent me with my letters to her, so that she could save them both. I still have almost all of the letters that I sent. I've looked at one or two since then, I don't necessarily read them. I've told the kids that when Lyla and I are gone, then they can read them.

There was some drug abuse there, but I wasn't interested and stayed clear of it. I knew a few people who were doing it, but they didn't amount to much even without the drugs. One time I was with some guys in a truck, I was riding shotgun and I was looking in the glove box for something, and I found a bag in there with some leaves in it, and I'd never seen it before and I looked at it and looked at the driver, and then back at the bag and then at the driver and he was getting this real sheepish look on his face, this real guilty look, and suddenly it dawned on me what I was holding. We were going down the road about 50 miles and hours and I rolled down the

window and out it went, and the suddenly the driver said, "That thing cost me 30 dollars!", and I said, "You keep that shit out of my truck!", and that was the end of it. The driver was a private and I was a Sergeant, so he wasn't going to give me any shit.

I recall the day my service ended vividly. On December 25th, 1969, the best Christmas present I ever had in my life was watching them cut orders for me to get out of Vietnam and out of the Army. I then went out in helicopters and dropped teargas on people to get them ready for the artillery: in other words, to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I helped kill Atheists. Then I came back and went to the out processing station, and two days later I went home. As the plane took off, there was this huge cheer, and then the plane was silent, all the way across the ocean. They were kind of stunned, numb, dazed all the way across the ocean. When we landed at McCord Air Force Base just South of Tacoma, there was another cheer. When we got to the base I thought to myself, "They're going to screw around, and make us hang around all day Sunday and out process Monday"... and I was wrong. They took us by bus over to Fort Lewis and gave us our physicals at about 1 am. All night long we processed out, and by 7:30 or 8 am, I was out of the Army. Later on, weeks or even months later it occurred to me, the reason the Army didn't screw around and make us wait and out process on Monday is that nobody would have been there on Monday. I am unable to describe to you how, at that point, absolutely fed up everybody was with the Army. We had had it. We wanted nothing to do with the Army.

After Vietnam, when I was teaching high-school, one of my colleagues was had a course called "Great Wars", and I said, "There were no great wars, not one of them is worth a shit." Vietnam made me really suspicious of our government and its motives. Iraq now is a case of deja vous. My unit, the 4th infantry division, is the same division that captured Saddam Hussein, and I think "Great, here we go again."