

Interview with Mr. Ron Jensen

Veteran: Vietnam War

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Narrator: Today is Wednesday, February 18, 2004. This is the beginning of the interview with Ron Jensen at the Kinsley United Methodist Church, Kinsley, Kansas. Mr. Jensen is 60 years old, having been born December 19, 1943. My name is Chris Bell and I along with Brandi Riisoe will be interviewing Mr. Jensen.

Narrator: Which war and branch did you serve in?

Jensen: United States Navy, Vietnam War

Narrator: What was your rank?

Jensen: Hospital Man Class 2nd

Narrator: Where did you serve in Vietnam?

Jensen: Da Nang, Marble Mountain Air Facility

Narrator: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Jensen: During the influx of the Vietnam War I was drafted. I went down, took a physical in Kansas City and passed. They counted you off in ones and twos; they had two lines. Ones went to the Army. Twos went to the Marine Corps. After about 40 applicants they discontinued enlisted people or drafted them into either the Army or the Marines. The rest of them they told us to go back home. So I went back home. At that time I didn't want to go overseas, especially Vietnam, so I went to the recruiting office in Dodge City and joined the Navy, in the mean time, which I had an option to do. At that time they weren't going to take any recruits, until they found out I had two years of college, so they signed me up. That way I stayed out of the draft and enlisted in the Navy for four years. If you didn't enlist, you were drafted for two years.

Narrator: When were you first shipped to Vietnam?

Jensen: I left for Vietnam on September 20, 19

Narrator: How long were you in Vietnam?

Jensen: 366 days. It happened to be a leap year, so I had to stay an extra day.

Narrator: What work did you do?

Jensen: Well, I started off as a stretcher bearer for the Navy hospital, and what we did is when helicopters came in with either wounded or DOA (dead on arrival), we had to take them off the helicopters or sometimes they came in on tanks, and put them in a triage area. There they were sorted out how their wounds were. If they were critical, or dead, or not too serious, they were sorted in different wards of the hospital. Then after two months, we had an inspection, and they asked if anybody could type. I did. I told them I could type, so they put me in administration, which typed up the injuries, what happened to them, where they got hurt, or killed. Then sometimes you'd send that to the Bureau of Medicine in Washington, D.C. I stayed there in administration for about the last ten months.

Narrator: Tell us about boot camp.

Jensen: I took boot camp, 13 weeks of it, in San Diego, California, Camp Nimitz. The reason it was 13 is because there was so much influx of people being drafted or joining the service, they couldn't ship them out fast enough, so we had to stay an extra two weeks. That's the first thing you do when you join the service; boot camp. Learn all the regulations and rules.

Narrator: What are some of your memories of training?

Jensen: Well, the first two weeks were pretty tough (laughs). You had to learn to march in formation, and in the Navy you did your own laundry. We had to get up at three o'clock in the morning and stand in line for chow, for breakfast. Sometimes you didn't get served until six. You stood at...you were at ease and then you fell to parade rest, which meant kind of a relaxed position. You had to stand in unison, you know, in line. It was pretty ironic (laughs). You stood guard at the clothesline with no clothes on it. It was just part of your duty. And of course I didn't smoke when I went there, but you couldn't smoke for the first month you were there, so if you were a smoker, that might be quite a jolt. Everything put on your plate when you went to chow line... you had three meals a day. You had to eat. You learned to eat...didn't throw anything away. A lot of marching, you did a lot of marching, probably three or four hours a day. That's just the first two weeks, you know, and you learned your orders, you know, who you take orders from, and etiquette, how to and who to salute.

Narrator: How much time did you spend in Vietnam?

Jensen: Spent one full year, of course, as I said, it was leap year, so I had to stay an extra day. I figured that would be the day I got shot or something like that, or in a plane crash (laughs).

Narrator: What was your experience in Vietnam on arrival?

Jensen: I got there at like four in the morning off of a plane from Okinawa. They dropped a sea bag, which was my clothes and everything I had. They dropped it right in a mud puddle, and I had my white uniform on, so that was a pretty good indoctrination. And when you come into a foreign country like that, especially in war, you don't know if somebody's there to shoot you, what you've got to do or anything, kinda like out in the country here. Kinda weird experience, you know. You don't know

anybody. I went to breakfast that morning, sat down to breakfast at a long table like this, and looked over to a kid over there. He was one of the kids I knew in Kinsley...Keith Dupree. He ended up marrying my youngest sister. He was leaving the day I was coming, which makes you feel really good. Some people keep a calendar to count down their days. I started that, but after about two or three months I got tired of marking them off. You don't know, when you're overseas and away from home and you don't know anybody, and in a war, you just figure you do your time, and if you make it out, you make it out. We stayed in a transit area for the first four or five days until they put us in a place we were gonna be for the duration. A lot of people went directly out in the field. Being in the hospital corps in the United States Navy, we're actually the doctors for the Marines. They have nobody medical. We're the medical doctors for them. And you didn't know until you got there if you went out in the field with a Marine group or went to a base hospital, which I was lucky. I was in a base hospital.

Narrator: Did you have any combat experience?

Jensen: Never saw any combat, but we were in situations where combat came to us, probably within two or three miles, lobbing mortars and rockets, but they were aiming at a helicopter port across the road, so some of them would fall short, and there would be actual casualties, but as far as direct combat, I was never in it. The Chinese were helping the North Vietnamese, and what they'd do, they'd teach them how to fire the rockets, like over in Iraq right now. They were not real smart on how to do that stuff, make a lot of them have a short fuse and they'd fall short. In the area I was working in I went to work one morning, we worked in quonset huts. You know what those are? (Describes quonset huts with gestures in comparison). About two months before I left, they had an office blown away. There was nobody in it.

Narrator: How did you communicate with your family?

Jensen: Well, it's a lot different now, since you have phones, I mean. Over there we didn't have them. We couldn't phone anybody. They did come through one time, with this thing called MARS, which somebody set up like a telephone deal once a year. You could call home. You had to go through Hawaii. I don't know what it cost. That was not my concern at the time, but I called home once, and every time you got done saying something you had to say "over". My parents, being of their age, they didn't know what I was talking about, so after about a two-minute conversation I hung up, didn't call them again. Every time you had to transmit something and you were done with what you said, you had to say "over" and they didn't understand what "over" meant. So I didn't call but once. So as far as calling them anytime you wanted to, no, you couldn't do that.

Narrator: How about writing letters?

Jensen: Wrote letters at least once a week...All you postage was free, so you could write 50 or 60 or 100 letters if you wanted to, but I wasn't married or had a girlfriend, but I kept in contact with my mom and dad.

Narrator: How were your supplies?

Jensen: In the hospital, of course, we had the best food of anybody, you know, because the hospital has got to have good food in quarantine, where you don't get any diseases or anything like that. You had to take a malaria pill with your meal, a big one, like a horse tablet. You had to take that so you wouldn't get the symptoms of malaria. We had ample supplies, except probably for blood. The place I worked, did you ever see the show "MASH"? OK, this is where I was stationed at, the world's largest MASH unit, you know, where over there in Korea where that was filmed, supposedly. This was Vietnam. We had a 700-bed capacity, the world's largest ever MASH unit.

Narrator: Did you get to travel while in the service?

Jensen: After six months you were there, if you didn't have any violations, you had the choice of 16 or 17 different options of where to go. All it would cost you would be what you spent on meals and gifts and stuff like that. They flew you to and from, plus give you a motel room. I had the choice of 17 and I chose Australia because it's seven days. It took a day to get down there on a flight. You had choices like Tokyo, the Philippines, which I was stationed there once before, so I didn't go there. You couldn't to the United States though. After you spent a year there and re-upped, you know, go back for another year, you could have a choice of anywhere, free flight, free stay, for a week, anywhere in the free world. It was a vacation. Then you had two times you had in-country...weekend. You got a weekend twice a year, and I went to a place called Cam Ranh Bay, where I swam and fished or stuff like that on the Indian Ocean. We played softball a lot, and we had softball teams when we had time.

Narrator: Did you keep a diary?

Jensen: No. Went to church on Sundays. The only reason I did that, well (laughs), not really, but if you attended church, then after church you got a candy bar. Of course, when you're overseas like that, especially when you're along the Equator, it's pretty hot over there, so a chocolate candy bar is pretty much of a plus. We had a choice of either Protestant, Catholic or Jewish religion. You had those services to choose from.

Narrator: What did you do for entertainment?

Jensen: Yeah, they had bingo, which I didn't play very much. They had bingo on certain nights. Then they'd have USO shows. Do you know what that stands for? United States Overseas. It's a group, or organization, that puts on shows or things for GI's, overseas or here in the United States. Saw a lot of good bands, especially the 60's and 70's music, you know...people who acted and sang like Elvis Presley. You had a dark room, could have sworn it was him, but you turned the lights on and it was a girl. They had very good dance groups. We had pinball machines. We had a place where they made milkshakes, kind a like a game room. That was on the whole base for everybody, not just the Navy people. We had Marines stationed there, you know, and some Air Force people. We had a basketball court where you could play basketball. Like I said, we had softball teams. We played other units from around that area. That's about it as far as entertainment. I owned one of the few TV's that were there. I had a little fan that I bought, one of the last fans, and a little refrigerator.

Narrator: Did you make many friends?

Jensen: Made a lot of friends, met a lot of people from all over the United States. Five or six of my relatives came over to see me, that were in the service too, and two or three neighbor kids, that were close. They were like in the country R & R stuff that I was telling you about. On weekends, they would come over and see me if they were close by.

Narrator: Have you kept in contact with friends you met?

Jensen: Yeah, two years ago I went to Norfolk, Virginia, and stopped down at Charleston, South Carolina, and called one on the phone there. I didn't know if he was alive because he was over there after I was. I met this kid I was stationed with in Georgia for a year and a half. After I got out of Vietnam, I was stationed in Albany, Georgia. I looked him up and he came out and visited with us for a good two hours. I've had two or three people come and visit here, that I was stationed with too. So I kept in contact with four or five of them. Makes things go a lot smoother. Small world is what it is. I get over there that see that.

I had one flight nurse that came in to see me. It was my cousin. I don't know if you know her, Venita Katz, Hermie and Florence's daughter, that comes back here every now and then. OK, she was a flight nurse. She was a medevac. They had these planes, like 747's and stuff like that they put the very injured, the critically injured on, fly them to other hospitals around the world to get them out of the war zone. She was a flight nurse on there, and she came in to see me, which was pretty neat cause it's an officer. I'm enlisted, and officers aren't supposed to fool around with enlisted people, but that was pretty nice. She came in and kissed me and everybody was like, "Gee whiz, what's going on here?" That was really nice. It kinda breaks the monotony. There were no females stationed where we were stationed. In fact, that's probably the only American girl I saw in the seven months I was stationed there. The place I was stationed had marshal law. Do you know what that is? You can't go off base. You get off base; you're on your own. You might be trying to sneak off base to do something. I went to the town of Da Nang, took a prisoner down there one time and this town's over a half million people. Saw about five people in twenty minutes. They don't even come outside.

Narrator: When did you service end?

Jensen: May 7th, 1970. Before you get out of the service, they ask you to re-up. You know, they want to keep you in there, but I declined. I didn't like was I was doing. I was a hospital corpsman, and I didn't like working in the hospital. So, when I got my discharge papers, got my car, and drove from Albany, Georgia to Atlanta, Georgia, met my dad, and we went to see the Hawks, no not the Hawks, the Atlanta Braves, play baseball. It seemed like you had a load of potatoes taken off your shoulders. You didn't have to put up with that stuff anymore.

Narrator: Did you go to school after the service?

Jensen: I went back and enrolled at Fort Hays State. I graduated a year and a half later...used the government GI Bill. They pay you so much up front to go to school for two years, so I used that up. Got my degree in teaching, and then I decided not to teach. My degree was in education and geography.

Narrator: How were you treated when you came home?

Jensen: I came back to a small town. Around here they didn't care. I was transferring one time from one base to another, in Fort Lauderdale, I got spit on once, but that was about it. I saw my first hippie in San Francisco International Airport, and that's the weirdest town I've ever been in. They weren't as bad as some of these people today. I suppose in a bigger city, you might be looked down upon, but there was no parade or celebration or anything. You just fulfilled your duty and went back home. I didn't work for the first year after I got back...took a year off of life.

Narrator: What was your opinion of the Vietnam War?

Jensen: Well, the first two or three months I thought, well, I'm here to do a job, and do the best I can. Then after awhile you see all the waste, the...involvement, what we're in didn't fit the reason why I should be over there. If you bitched to somebody about that you'd probably be court marshaled, you know, and thrown in prison, so I just let... I could see why the people probably didn't like it, you know, what happened at Kent State. Of course, I don't like those marches or anything like that, but I can see why they were griping. We were over there to stop communism, but communism over in that area, in Southeast Asia, was prevalent in all the countries over there. If it wouldn't have been for the Chinese, we probably could have won the war, but we didn't go out to win the war. All these people went out, sometimes when they first started, and they didn't give them a gun. They couldn't kill anybody. That's not a war. It just got to the reason, you know. You went your full year, get out and go home, hope it was over with, but it was seven years later, wasn't it? I don't know. I think it ended seven years after I got out of there. The longest war, 56,000 and some killed over there, for what reason?

Have you ever been to that mini-wall...that replica of that wall in Washington, D.C.? That was over in Dodge City two years ago. That was pretty nice over there. Got a few friends I went to medical school with, they're on there. You see, when you get back out of the service, out of Vietnam, they send you to another duty station or a hospital somewhere in the United States. Of course, I applied to stay overseas, but I was over overseas for two years. So they said I had to come back home to the mainland, so, whatever you put in for in the service you usually don't get, you know, when you put in your duty stations. I kinda wanted to get closer to home. Oklahoma City had a Navy recruiting place there, an Army hospital in Denver, and they had a Navy training center in Olathe, Kansas. I put in for those and I got Albany, Georgia, so that's pretty close, isn't it (laughs)?

But I made a lot of friends down there in the South, and being I'm from the Midwest, it's different. The South, the deep South's a lot different than where I grew up. They don't celebrate Memorial Day when we do. Their deal, like up there in Mount Rushmore we have Abe Lincoln and all them, well, being the South and rebels and pro-slavery at one time, they had Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson. That's their favorite people. I probably was a redneck when I went down there. I didn't fit in very well in the deep South. I asked for a transfer 'cause I didn't like it there, and they gave me one choice, Key West, Florida. I probably should have taken it, but it was further from home.

Another thing I learned in Vietnam...most of the kids, I mean they were really kids, I was 23 years old. Most of the people I saw over there were were killed or injured were kids, young kids who never got to really enjoy life...18 years old, 19, most of them probably drafted...combat or air crashes.

We were stationed out in the middle of an area there, and they had two mountains on each side. We used to see rockets and the tanks firing. You ever see a shell...like every fifth round has a tracer. That means you throw a shell out there and every fifth round has a tracer in it so you can see it at night where you are shooting at. What really amazed me, they had a big ol' gun up there called a 155 Howitzer, and they'd sit on that mountain and you'd hear something go, a big bang, and you'd see that shell...I figured a shell would go straight, you know, like a projectile. Those things would tumble. They were so big they would tumble and you could see it, 'cause every fifth round you could see the tracer.

One place was called Marble Mountain. The other was Monkey Mountain. We asked them how come they called it Monkey Mountain. Well, they had baboons up there, wild baboons. When they first settled in that area there and made that hospital, they had a lot of rocks thrown down at these troops, and they turned around shooting, gee whiz, got the communists up there. They called them NVA, or North Vietnamese Army or the locals. The fact is, up there throwing them rocks down at them. Every time they'd see rocks start moving up there they'd shoot. They went up there a couple of days, exploring in the woods, and they found these baboons throwing those rocks down. A baboon is kinda human like in certain ways, but that's why they called it Monkey Mountain.

Pretty country, as far as vegetation goes, you've got your mountains. You've got your grasslands where you grow rice, grew lots of it too. Then you got your, like Kansas out here, just flat. I can't think what you call that. Hot and humid, a lot of rain, over a hundred inches of rain a year where we were stationed. Quite a bit isn't it? Lots of monsoon seasons, you know they had that.

Narrator: Did your time in Vietnam have an effect on you?

Jensen: Oh yeh, I'm sure it has. I was pretty wild and everything before I went in the service, but that kinda slows you down, shows you what values of life are. I'm not gonna say it changes everybody. A lot of people, when you get in trouble, they give you got a choice of going to the service or going to jail. It used to be strict discipline, but I don't think it is anymore. You know they got boot camp for people now. Someone gets in trouble they sent them to boot camp. Boot camp's tough. Straighten you out, make you have manners and respect other people. You do that now, the cops send you to a boot camp for people who are going to jail. Actually boot camp after three or four weeks, it got pretty easy, you got in a routine and it got pretty easy. I hated shining my shoes. This kid hated to clean his hat. You had to clean your hat, you know, white hat the Navy people wear, the sailors. So, he was good at shining shoes, so he shined my shoes and I scrubbed his hat. Worked out pretty good.

Narrator: What is your opinion of the war in Iraq?

Jensen: Kinda going down the same road, aren't we? Don't you think? We're over there and we can't get out now. That's what happened when we were over there. You get in a situation. You can't just pull up and leave, but we did finally have to after 10 or 12 years. Here it's a different story, I think, 'cause of mass destruction, chemical weapons, stuff like that. I mean, we didn't have to worry too much about that over there. I was there over the Tet offensive. You know what that is now? Tet is an Asian holiday, like what we have New Year's day. Tet offensive is when they tried to take over the whole country. Of course, the North Vietnamese pushed down, plus they had Chinese, Red Chinese, come in and help them. We had them pretty well beat, until they came in, and when that happened, I figured

that'd be the end of the world, I mean to me. They gave me a gun. I was in that office. They said, "If anybody comes through that door, you're to shoot him."

You know the Chinese are the most populous country in the world. One out of five people in the world are Chinese. You get them to help a country like that, you know, the North Vietnamese, and they said they started marching down there. I figured, well, that's going to be it here. They were supposed to overrun all of the villages and everything. Of course, they didn't have that many Chinese because you know, the real situation, they couldn't do that. I figured that's what they were going to do. That's when they went into Hanoi, and that's when they kinda took over. Made a lot of hoopla about that, that they're gonna stay communist, and they're gonna drive out the insurgents, which we were, so I figures we weren't gonna win the war.

Like I said, we didn't lose it. It was kinda a draw. Iraq, I don't think there'll be a draw there, do you?

Narrator: Thank you very much for your time.