

Interview with Mr. David Werner

Veteran – Vietnam War

Date for the Interview: April 5, 2006

Place for Interview: Kinsley United Methodist Church, Kinsley, Kansas 67547

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Narrator: This is Mr. David Werner who was born March 3, 1943 at Kinsley, Kansas. My name is Shannon Fulls and I will be interviewing him along with Alexis Stiebe, Sara Stanley and Aaron Owings. Mr. Werner served in the Army during the Vietnam War.

Narrator: What does war mean to you?

Werner: Well, it's a nasty deal. It really is. Of course you know we always strive for peace but sometimes it doesn't happen that way. Of course we all know Vietnam kind of ...uh... more of a conflict than I would say more political than anything.

Narrator: What would you do for entertainment when you weren't in combat?

Werner: Well, I hate to say this but we had a club and that is usually where we went after we got off work. We were on 12-hour shifts, operational 24 hours a day. Since I was in transportation, our job was to work on aircraft, which my MOS was an aircraft electrician. We had a heli pad and then it came in and they brought their aircraft to us and we were to get it to fly.

Narrator: What emotions did you feel at war?

Werner: Well, you got to remember when you're 20 years old you don't ... you think you're indestructible. Just like any high schooler gets out you know nothing's going to happen to you. And that's why they always get young men and when they get older why then they start thinking about it and ... start to realize that "you know you can get killed".

Narrator: Did your patriotism change when you were at war?

Werner: I would say first we did what we had to do because I was drafted. I didn't have a choice. But after I was over there for a while I could see this was going the wrong way. I don't ... I'm not going to put the United States government down but ... we kind of knew this was a bad, bad deal. So ... I left. I was just glad to get out of there because they were talking about re-upping. I thought iff I re-upped I would have to stay there. I thought if we had the chance, to get out, you better get out while the getting is good.

Narrator: How do you look at the flag when it passes down the street?

Werner: Oh, very proud of it. I think everybody should be. I've been on the color guard for 20-some years. After 9/11, of course, I have to say this, seemed like every time we lined up for something there was always a mess as to which way we were going. And when I went there that day I say, "Which way we going?" And nobody seemed to know. I thought this was another one of those when you're all flustered. And it happened to be the first time we were at the Homecoming parade. This was right after 9/11. And I think we were supposed to go this way around Main Street and we come around the other way for some odd reason. I know we got downtown. There they all were and all of a sudden they saw us coming and it was probably one of the better times I've ever been in. The crowd got up and started cheering and I really liked that.

Narrator: How were you received when you came back to the U.S.?

Werner: It really wasn't good...because you know they were calling us baby killers and all that stuff and Vietnam...it really just wasn't a good situation at the time. I don't think anybody at home was too proud of it, you know, what we did, but it was just a bad, bad situation. I don't want to talk to...somebody should interview Vince Burghart. I mean he had it tough. I ought to say it really wasn't...it just wasn't well liked, you know.

Narrator: Why would you or wouldn't you encourage our generation to join the military?

Werner: Well, I...I think it's a good deal, I mean for myself. You got to remember you know back in my era...I can honestly say when I was growing up we...I lived out in the Sts. Peter and Paul community and it was just a pretty tight niche. You never really got out too much. I can remember one summer I never went to town. So...when I got drafted, if you'll read on the paper there, see I went from Fort Leonard Wood to Fort Eustis, Virginia, from Fort Eustis to Fort Campbell, then Vietnam. It gave me a chance to get out and just kind of thrust into the world without even realizing there is another world out there, you know, besides your own little town. We became more aware of what's going on in the world. It got very lonely really fast.

Narrator: What were your feelings about being drafted?

Werner: At that time everybody you knew were. It was just part of the system back then. Even guys older than I was...an old friend of mine he told me, "Well, I knew I was going to get drafted." And he said "It's kind of a low time." So he could push your name to the top of the list so you would know you could just go right away instead of waiting for it. In my case I got called out up in 1963 for a physical. They just made sure you passed. But then we waited around, but in the meantime my dad died. My boss got me a deferment for six months. And I had to go through the procedure all over again...which was back to take the physical and get back to service training. By 1965 they called me up and told me I was going. And if in all reality...even if you talk to older guys or people that's been in the service, they'll all say, "Yeah. This shouldn't be happening." It'll make you realize you can work it out.

Narrator: Can you tell us about the medals that you received?

Werner: Well, your...Armed Services Medal, you automatically get that; and of course your two Vietnam jobbies; and that's your campaign ribbons for being overseas. There's one thing that qualifies you for the VFW, which basically, VFW stands for "Veterans of Foreign Wars." I will say one thing. We had our job. We had a helipad and that's where all the stuff came in. It was up to the infantry to keep us protected. Of course anytime we'd get to a bad situation, we were supposed to go right back to combat which was the original plan. But if everybody was doing their job, why that's not supposed to happen.

Narrator: What was the highest ranking you achieved?

Werner: E-5

Narrator: E-5?

Werner: Yea, which was the same as a sergeant...but categorized in...see I was a Specialist 5th class because your MOS was you were specifically trained for that and nothing else...specialized...kind of like doctors are today. You specialized in maternity; you specialized in ears, nose and throat, and obstetrics and stuff like that. And that's what the military would do basically.

Narrator: What were some of your jobs with that?

Werner: When I was overseas?

Narrator: Like on a day-to-day basis, what did you do?

Werner: The aircraft came in, you know, it was usually shot up. So since I was in electrician, we had to find the wires that were shot and repair them, get them back going. Then once again...there were like five shops in our company. There was prop and rotor, there was electricians, there were sheet metal men, and (inaudible). Then what we did, there was an inspector that came around and he'd go around the aircraft. He'd find everything that was wrong with it and he'd divide that up to the shop and they'd work on it. The electricians would take care of all the electrical stuff, the sheet metal men would take care of the sheet metal. You worked yourself so you got on the aircraft while they weren't on it. When you got done, why, the aircraft had to be inspected again, make sure it was flyable. After they okayed it, they released it. If it wasn't okay, it got sent back and you did whatever they found that didn't get repaired.

Narrator: What was the most important combat you were in?

Werner: Well, see you got to remember that I wasn't really in what they called "combat." We got...bored...several times when I was there but once again it was up to the perimeter to take care of you. All we did was take off and run to the bunkers hoping they would protect you from getting overrun. And that's basically what their job was to do. I think we got mortared three times while I was over there. Sometime they hit the hospital once. You're not suppose to do that. I don't know if you know

that, but all hospitals have a big red cross on them. And they know where it's at. They can report that to the Vienna Convention. I don't know if you're aware of the Vienna Convention, the fact that war has to follow rules too, believe it or not.

Narrator: Do you still keep in touch with some of the guys you met over there?

Werner: Oh, yes. I got a buddy of mine up in Minnesota, whom I talk to. I haven't seen him for a couple of years. I have been up there probably four times to see him and he's been down here twice. He is probably the only one I really keep in touch with. I've talked with several of them over the years.

Narrator: How difficult was the training?

Werner: Well, basic training was just a routine deal. They take you down to nothing, and I think that's what...that's how they train you. They just bring you down so low you will do what they say to do. And of course you're all the same mentality, so they bring you back up as one unit and that's how you get trained that way. Same thing is probably with football practice or basketball practice. You will all do the same thing so you will all work together. And that's the whole idea of it. And then once...they treat you pretty bad basically. They scream at you a lot. You go to do it right; you got to do it right. They call you all kinds of names which I don't think they do anymore because we're in a really different world now. You can't call people names. And the words that they call you, they aren't fit to be recorded. (All laugh)

Narrator: Were you able to write your family?

Werner: Oh yeah. They encouraged it. They highly encouraged you to write home. And there never was any problem getting mail back either. When I was over there, I didn't let my mother know where I was at so she didn't think I was in (*danger*). I told her I was somewhere else, so I didn't write too much in the letters of what I was doing.

Narrator: When you got back to the United States, did your family want to know a lot about the war or did they let you have some time to yourself?

Werner: Oh, yeah they asked a few questions. It was nothing real important. My sister she was always concerned about it...kind of catching up on the news because they showed the same thing every night on the Vietnam War. Kind of like the Iraqi War now.

Narrator: Did the media kind of exaggerate the truth about what was going on over there?

Werner: Sometimes they did. When it really got the war and everything...it's just like...I don't know if you ever watched the movie "Good Morning, Vietnam" but that's kind of the way it was. They would let the media know exactly what they wanted them to hear. It's what they did. That is what would go on sometimes. If you ever watched the movie, "Good Morning Vietnam," he wasn't allowed to say what he actually saw because they would prove it wrong.

Narrator: How was life where you were stationed?

Werner: It wasn't bad. We had to build our own hooches to live in. And while we were doing that we stayed in another place that was...that had accommodations for us. I think the only thing I remember the most was, what stuck out the most was, that I really wanted a hot shower one time. We never had a hot shower. It was always cold water. They had heaters up there, but by the time we got there, it had all run out. We just stood under the spigot and let it run all over you.

Narrator: How did you react when you first found out you were drafted?

Werner: Well, I knew it was coming. I mean I was scared, don't get me wrong. And nervous, I was not really scared, just nervous there was going to be a whole new experience with the war. I know I went to basic training thinking that I was the end of the world. But my brother-in-law he'd already been there, and he said what makes you any different from anybody else. And I went in with that attitude. And I can't say...I really did enjoy the service life. It kind of had some bad points in there, but it gave me a chance to get all the way around the world almost. Clear across the United States and halfway around the world. I went over on a troop carrier ship and that took us 31 days. And if you really look at the Pacific Ocean, it is a big ocean. You got an immense amount of water all over. And when you come from Kansas, which is flatland and seeing a lot of water it wasn't just rain. And it was day after day and there was no land around, till we got to the South Seas. And then you started seeing little islands here and there. But I know there was no land for 20 days. That's a long time without feeling the ground. And then of course I got flown back on an airplane which only took us 16 hours.

Narrator: Do you feel it is important to tell our generation about the war?

Werner: I think people should know what it's really about. My big thing is...you got to go back to World War II, which you know was a whole different war I agree. I don't think people know how many people died in World War II. You got to look at this; we only lost 54,000 which is way too many. The total casualties of World War II are in the millions. You know what a million is, that is a lot of people. Total casualties: China alone lost ten million people. Russia lost more than nine million. Poland lost over 5 million people. The United States lost 500 and some odd thousand. And I'm talking total casualties. If you think about that, that's an awful lot of people, the State of Kansas, four times, everybody that lives here. And that's bad. And all their wives on top of that. Just a bad deal, a really bad deal.

Narrator: Did you come into much contact with the Vietnam civilians?

Werner: We had civilians come on the base every day. They had what they called (*locals*). I think they were trying to help the Vietnamese people out because they were very poor. So they had locals come on base and they did home jobs. We had hooch girls that cleaned our hooches everyday so we didn't have to do it. They would come and sweep them out, and rearrange them so they didn't look like a slob hole, if you've ever watched M.A.S.H. as they call it. They hired a lot of them when we were building our

hooches. They came in and helped build them, and they got paid by the United States government. And the people over there are poor. And there are a lot of people over there. I don't know if you ever got out of a ballgame and how many people come out of a ballgame and all those people are out there for a momentary, then all those people disappear. In Vietnam there are people and they never disappear. They are there constantly. It's just like being at the ballgame when you get to the city. It's just like that all the time. They just never go away. There are a lot of people over there.

Werner: My job, when I first got there, I was a truck driver also. I had to go to Saigon everyday for about...basically I wasn't even in camp because I spent all that time in the airport waiting to get a load. And a lot of times I would sit in there all day and never really get home. Every once in awhile we would go back the next day and hope they got a load, because we went over as a whole company and started (inaudible).

Narrator: How did you distinguish the difference between the civilians and the militants?

Werner: Well, once again I have to say, I never really got to see what they called the enemy, because they (the infantry) were supposed to protect us. When we were going into Saigon, they had convoys: one in front of us and one behind us in case something happened. But most of all I saw was a lot of rice paddies and civilians working the rice fields. And the children would come up to you. And when the bridges got blown up, you had to wait. You had single file traffic. I never really knew where these kids came from, but all of a sudden there they were. And they always had Coca-Cola for a dollar, and they were the big 16 ounce bottles. And a dollar, back then, for a bottle of pop was a lot of money. But they'd show up there. And another bad thing is those kids even had marijuana too. Of course, that was a way of life over there. Marijuana was pretty prevalent. I never did smoke any of it. I drank a lot of beer, but I never smoked any dope.

Narrator: Did the Vietnamese have a strong sense of survival?

Werner: Oh yeah. Actually, you want to talk about dedicated. There is a book out called Tunnels of Cu Chi. That's where I was stationed at. But those Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, they dug under the camp...just miles and miles and miles of tunnels...big enough to fit even a hospital down there. They took care of their wounded and whatever. But I do know that we knew they were out there. And we knew that there were some tunnels out there. But we had no idea until it was over with how massive that tunnel complex was. They were right under us. They came back out and covered the entire country and they were right underneath us...that was a big complex of tunnels. They built them according to specs too because the Vietnamese built backward to us. When you put a coat on or you put a shirt on backwards you know how it feels. When you put a shirt on backwards that's what it felt like but their tunnels were built for their specs and they could get in them. Most of the tunnel rats which the United States had were Orientals because that hole or that crawl space was designed so most Americans couldn't get in them. They were built by specs.

Narrator: Would you like to make a trip back to Vietnam some day?

Werner: Oh yeah, I'd really like to. In fact at those tunnels of Cu Chi that I was talking about, I happened to see something on television. Now it's one of their attractions that you go see when you're in Vietnam. They take you down through the tunnels and show you what the complex looked like and they've got a tour guide too. I just saw that here about a month ago. Cu Chi was located right on the (inaudible) which was a massive, dense forest out there. I don't know if you ever heard of Agent Orange, but they got rid of a lot of the jungles by spraying that stuff on them and that's when a lot of people in Vietnam were exposed to Agent Orange which is really a bad thing, but it did defoliate. They pushed a lot of trees down. They had to do that.

Narrator: Did you ever hear of any casualties from friendly fire?

Werner: Oh, yeah, we knew it went on. See where I was at, the Jolly Green Giant, it would go up and usually if he was up there he'd spray the whole area. They had what they called a gatling gun that flew over and when he started firing he'd put a bullet like in a football field if you'd run across it, he'd have a bullet in every square foot of a football field. You know I remember that. That's how many rounds they'd put out on a strip in the area. But, oh yes, there was always a chance of friendly fire killing people. That's just part of war too. I do know one thing we did do right outside our gate. There had a Vietnamese, a Viet Cong tied up in a tree dead. They let him hang up there for a long time. It was supposed to be a warning to them, I guess. I never got that close to him, but I could see him hanging up there. They had him tied up in the tree.

Narrator: What's the most important thing people today should understand about war?

Werner: That you can get killed. Of course when you're young like your age, you don't think so. You're indestructible and you don't think twice. That's too bad. It's a way of life that war has to settle things through the ages. Personally I often wonder if, I know my mom, she won't watch a war story because she thinks it terrible. Sometimes I think people should be made to watch that stuff once in a while, especially the graphic and the crude stuff. (Inaudible) And the worst part of it is they get captured. The Orientals to me are pretty...they've got a mean streak in them. They know how to make you talk, and they do a lot of torture. I don't know we'd go and watch a movie about POWs. It's a horrible situation.

Narrator: Were you ever trained to like if you were a P.O.W.?

Werner: You're only supposed to give your name, rank and serial number. I don't know if you know right now but that gal that just came back (*from Baghdad*) the reporter? She just got reunited with her family. I mean that was really tragic for this lady. Maybe she shouldn't have been over there. Well, and we don't know what she was forced to say. Once again we know the Iraqis are very, very torturous. When you're under torture...you don't know what you're going to say but basically you're only supposed to give your name, rank, and serial number. That's one reason why they don't want you to have cameras around because if you've got cameras on you, you know they could take the cameras and get pictures from the film and then they could see what the compound looked like. You're not really

supposed to take a picture of it because if that ever got in the enemy hands, why they're going to know your layout, what it looks like.

Narrator: This may be a question that you can't answer but were you ever told not to speak of anything there?

Werner: No, they never did. During my orientation before I left they didn't say anything about it. I think they knew that Vietnam was kind of a bad situation. But people are going to talk anyway. Of course, we all know the deal of people going into Canada that disapproved of the war. See that's what, that's the way it lasted, well the conflict (*in Vietnam*) lasted for ten years. They used a, I don't know, a check and balanced system that they fought, we fought, maintained. Of course, they didn't let us be exactly...our military people couldn't do exactly what they wanted to do because the presidency said "Stop here; you can't go any further," and that's the way it went.

Narrator: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Werner: Oh, just basically, like I said, war is not a pretty picture, and I do wish that our history classes, one time, would give the total casualties, like I said in World War II. When we get over 20 million or 30 million people it makes you wonder about all the death and destruction that takes place. And of course now we're fighting a war that's pretty well technology. I just heard the other day they've got a company putting out flak vests that they're wearing over there. They're lighter weight, but they're not approved by the government. Shrapnel can't go through it. But these guys wore those all the time. I only wore mine on the convoy, and they are heavy. I usually ended up sitting on mine more than I wore it. That's the only thing to add. But I really wish that the history books would tell more about casualties and the loss of life, total loss of life counting civilians too. We've been lucky here. We thought 9/11 was bad, and children got killed in that one. Can you imagine those kids in Poland and Italy in World War II that got killed every time we dropped a bomb? A lot of children got killed too.