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Oral History - Joe Holt - Vietnam

Alexa Fisher

Southern Adventist University, falexa@southern.edu

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Student Interviewer's Name: Alexa Fisher

Interviewee Name: Joe Holt

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in one session over the telephone on November 9, 2016 and lasted about 40 min. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Joe Holt:

Joseph P. Holt was born in San Francisco, California in 1947. In August of 1965, Joe climbed up the stairs to the recruiters office and enlisted into the Marine Corps. He was in the service for four years, 1965-1969, and travelled all over the Pacific Ocean, primarily off the coast of Vietnam. During his first trip overseas, he was with his first rifle battalion, Second Platoon, India Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment. He was later transferred to the Charlie Company where he became a mortar man. Joe is married, has children and is currently living in San Jose, California. The USS Hornet, a ship that Joe spent twenty-two months on during his service, has now been made into a museum and is docked at Pier Three in Alameda, San Francisco, California.

Interviewer: Alexa Fisher (AF)

Interviewee: Joe Holt (JH)

AF: Hi Joe! Thanks for talking to me again! How are you doing?

JH: Hello! I'm doing good... I just got home from the store.

AF: Oh, really? Well, that was good timing! (chuckles) Are you ready for my questions?

JH: Yes! I am ready and willing to answer whatever you've got.

AF: Ok, first off, did you enlist or were you drafted into the Vietnam War?

JH: I enlisted.

AF: What made you decide to enlist?

JH: The thought of not enlisting never crossed my mind.

AF: Was anyone in your family in the military before you?

JH: Yes. My father (WWII) and brother. They were both in-between war years though.

AF: What branch did you decide to join?

JH: The Marine Corps.

AF: So, what was bootcamp like?

JH: Ummm... indescribable. I, uh.... I don't even attempt to describe it in my book today, because nobody would believe it. It's just really, really humiliating and inhumane.

AF: Was it a lot of physical [the humiliation], mental, or a mixture of both?

JH: Uhhh, mixture of both.

AF: So, what kind of physical tasks did you have to perform?

JH: Well, you do physical training every day in bootcamp and at the end of bootcamp they give you a test. You know, how many push ups, how many sit ups... and uh, and then a field course where you have to climb up and jump over walls a lot and stuff. Then you would graduate.

AF: When you would run those courses everyday, would things get competitive between any of the guys?

JH: No... it was always obvious who was better, but the point of the Marine Corps, umm... dealt with the slowest and the weakest man, so, everybody helped everybody else get through.

AF: So, how long were you in bootcamp before you were called to fight in the war?

JH: Well, bootcamp was just the very beginning of training, which was bootcamp for 10 weeks, and then I went to infantry training for 3 weeks and then I went to, uh, training for my individual specialty for another 3 weeks. And then I was assigned to a rifle company and there, we just did maneuvers and tests and everything everyday until we got orders to ship out.

AF: What sort of tasks did you do in the infantry training bootcamp?

JH: Oh, they just taught us the finer points of using different weapons. Uhh... you know, difficult courses to go through and a lot of them were like fire courses, so, it was pretty cool

if you weren't sick, but I got sick because it was very, very rainy. Overtime I got pneumonia.

AF: So, after you were finished at the infantry training camp, where did you say you went?

JH: You go to a different training facility to instruct you on your military occupational speciality. I had been selected to be a machine gunner, so they sent me to the machine gun school with 20-30 other guys for 3 weeks.

AF: How were you selected to become a machine gunner?

JH: I have no idea.

AF: Oh ok, so, you think higher up officials picked you out?

JH: It's a mystery to me.

AF: (Chuckles) Oh... so, I guess we are on the same page with that. So, you were a machine gunner. What kind of gun did you carry?

JH: An M60 machine gun.

AF: Before you enlisted, and were going through your training, had you ever handled a gun before?

JH: Oh, yes, but umm, not you know, not properly. My Dad was an outdoorsman, so I shot from a very young age but the Marine Corps teaches you how to shoot right.

AF: So, once you got the call that you were going off to war, how did you feel?

JH: It was sort of exciting. That's what we were meant for.

AF: Were you excited to be traveling to a new place — having a new adventure?

JH: Well, every step of my 4 years was an adventure. So like, I went on my first ship, you know, I got to go to Hawaii, Okinawa, and then we went to Vietnam.

AF: What was your first experience on a ship like?

JH: It was, uh, pretty much a nightmare because this little ship, um, had 1500 guys and about 1300 of them got sea sick, and I didn't. So, I got to clean up after them.

AF: So, you didn't get sea sick, but did you get nauseous cleaning up everyone else's sickness?

JH: Yep.

AF: So, how many days did it take you to get to Okinawa, Japan then?

JH: Well, we went to Hawaii first, which took us 9 days and then it took us another 20 days to get to Okinawa.

AF: Oh wow! How long was the trip from Okinawa to Vietnam?

JH: Umm.. well, at the time, we were supposed to float up the coast of Vietnam and be available for any insertion whenever it was needed. So, we got to Vietnam in a day or two, but we floated off the coast for a few days.

AF: When you got to Vietnam did you stay on the ship the whole time or did you camp on land?

JH: Umm... no. When you do an amphibious assault you're land based all at once, so, we just, yeah... slept on the ground.

AF: Oh, ok. Did you receive any major injuries during your 4 years of service?

JH: Not, not what you would consider major.

AF: So, what DID (emphasized) you receive? (Chuckles)

JH: Well, I sort of broke my ankle once and I got cellulitis in my left foot which turns out to have been really dangerous stuff. And uhh, but that was just, rough and tumble.

AF: How did you hurt your ankle?

JH: I jumped off... a ... wall... to a stone, a cobble-stone path and I tried to turn left the instant I touched the ground, but my right ankle wasn't up to it.

AF: Were you in pursuit of someone or something or were you running away when this happened?

JH: Umm... no. We never ran away from anything, um, we were holed up, I was in a mortar platoon back then, so we called for "mortars up", which means the commanding officer wanted the mortars to come in service, so we were running up to an outpost...

AF: After you landed and hurt your ankle, did you keep running?

JH: Well, I flat stopped. It was the worst pain I had experienced in my life up until that time. And uh, they finally came back and got me, but I was out of commission.

AF: So, did you have to stay back at your camp until you were better?

JH: Uhh, yes.

AF: Were there any illnesses endemic to that area and did you get sick with it?

JH: I never got anything, but what I thought was the flu, it felt like, you know, it was miserable... but uh, malaria wasn't uncommon and the mosquitos were everywhere. You breathed them and ate 'em. They were everywhere.

AF: Oh wow! Were you able to protect yourselves from the mosquitos at all?

JH: You breathed them and you ate 'em.

AF: So there was no avoiding them?

JH: Nope, but they gave us insect repellent, but um, you can't block alot with insect repellent. And besides, you put insect repellent on and they'll still buzz around you which will make you crazy.

AF: Did it get to a point where you became used to the mosquitos being around a little bit?

JH: No, we didn't get used to them. It was just, part of the way things were.

AF: Did you ever come into Agent Orange during your service?

JH: I've been told I did.

AF: You've been told that you have, but you're not sure?

JH: Agent Orange wasn't an issue when I was over there. It turns out they had been spraying it, but we didn't know or didn't care. Umm... about 20 years ago, the federal administration came out, with uh, a graphic dates and areas that were, uh, where Agent Orange was used and it turns out we were involved with a few of those.

AF: Are there any missions or attacks that especially stand out in your mind?

JH: Quite a few, but the pivotal one was called "Operation Hastings." And if you just look on the web, "Operation Hastings," and you look under India Company, there's quite a bit written about "Operation Hastings."

AF: What happened during that operation?

JH: We were sent to try to determine if the North Vietnamese Army was coming to the demilitarized zone. Umm... and we found out they were.

AF: What happened next?

JH: We... got in... the biggest gunfight I've ever been in.

AF: Did you lose a lot of men?

JH: Yep.

AF: Were the losses more on the Vietnamese side or the American?

JH: Ummm... I couldn't tell, because we only found a few bodies, but we were definitely trying to eliminate as many of them as we could. I would still claim, I don't know, I don't know!

AF: Any other battles you feel were important?

JH: That one [Operation Hastings] sticks out in my mind because it affected so many other people other than me. There were multiple times where I got shot at, and that is important to me. You know, but it was just a common occurrence. It was, the way it was.

AF: Wow! So, you were lucky to come out of it without having a bullet wound!

JH: Mhmm...

AF: So, how long were you over in Vietnam fighting?

JH: Actually, uhh, let's see ... (brief pause) 9 months total. It's a 13-month overseas tour, but part of that 13-months was taken up with our guerrilla warfare training and Okinawa and then the Philippines and you know, just getting over there. So, when it came right down to it, I was only in harm's way for 9 months.

AF: What was guerrilla warfare training like?

JH: Umm... interesting. Learned alot of stuff. It very rarely came into use, because like I said, we went over there thinking we were gonna deal with Viet Cong, the local insurgent forces, instead we dealt with the North Vietnamese Army.

AF: Where was your guerrilla warfare training? Were you still in the States?

JH: Yeah, alot of it was done in the States; it was what we were being trained for. But we went to a guerrilla warfare school in Okinawa and we went on a, uh, guerrilla warfare, uh, operation in the Philippines and uh (proudly says the next part), we were pretty darn good at it! Too bad we couldn't use more of our knowledge.

AF: So, you used your guns more than you guerrilla warfare training in actual battle?

JH: Well, guerrilla warfare has a lot to do with ambushes and uh, we were full fledged gun fighting, you know... (brief pause) about 200 people at a time, counting us. So that wasn't expected.

AF: How did your view of the war change once you were a part of it, rather than before you enlisted?

JH: ... not one bit, because we didn't care about the politics involved. We were given a mission to do and we went there to do it. But as it turns out, there were so many restrictions put on us and some of our leadership was very sorry indeed.

AF: How do you think the Vietnamese felt having the American's over there?

JH: Well, I just assumed that they begrudged us being there, but I went back there [Vietnam] a few years ago to a village that we hung around for a couple of months... (brief pause) and they were so happy to see us and they told us they considered us, the best thing that had ever happened to them when we were there, because when we were near them, we protected them against the, um, guerrilla forces who would steal their food and kill people. So, it was nice to hear that.

AF: So, while you were over there, did you befriend any Vietnamese?

JH: Oh, you didn't have the opportunity! There was a little village set up around our base camp lair and we'd go there and get cold Cokes and things like that and maybe a beer or two after that. So, uh, I befriended the guy and his gal who worked for him and befriended is... a little much, but uh, when I left, he gave me a picture of himself and on the back he wrote, you know, "remember me." He gave it to me in a little album and it was only about 10 years ago that I took that picture out of that album for doing a paper and I saw what he'd written on the back and uh, yeah, it was sort of cool. And uh, there was a young lady, who was just like this waitress there, um, we always flirted... (brief pause) She was always happy to see me. Which is all you really want, you know, when you're trying to relax a little bit.

AF: So, how was the food when you were over there?

JH: Fine.

AF: You were well fed?

JH: Yeah, there were times we weren't, you know, when we were in the middle of an operation or something and supplies came few and far between, but I can count those on one hand.

AF: What kind of food did you have?

JH: C-rations. Different C-ration meals would come in a case and there were multiple cans in the boxes and you know, some of them are chicken and noodles. Some of them had poundcake and some of them had fruit cake... it gets really involved; very well thought out.

AF: That doesn't sound too bad!

JH: Well, you normally had to eat it cold. You know, when you're hungry.

AF: So, did you make a lot of friends within your unit and/or outside of your unit?

JH: Yes [for inside his unit]. No, you would make friends with the people you worked with. And my original bunch, the guys I went over with, with India Company, umm, we were brothers by the time we got there. And when I went to a different outfit, I uh, I wouldn't say I got to be pals with them, but I felt like an orphan when they sent me to a different unit.

AF: Once you came back after your last tour, was it hard for you to get back into civilian life?

JH: I didn't think so at the time, but it really was.

AF: So, after you came back, what did you do?

JH: Uhh... I got a job with Pacific Gas and Electric Company. I started the Monday after I got home. But I didn't do well there, I had a problem with authority. Then I got a job at a gas station I had worked at before I enlisted.

AF: So, what are you up to these days?

JH: I'm retired. With a capital "R."

AF: What did you do before you retired?

JH: I was a gas serviceman for Pacific Gas and Electric Company for... 30 years, but I injured my shoulder and then I went to school and I decided I was going to be a history teacher, so I got a degree in history and then my... the ship I was stationed on, my last tour of duty in the Marine Corps, turns out to have been saved and is a museum. So I went and I got a graduate degree in museum studies so I could perfect the museum. Now I don't do anything.

AF: Do you still go back to the museum and do talks or anything?

JH: Yes, at least once a week. Sometimes 2 or 3 times a week. I was involved with it since the first day it got hauled over, so, I was really involved in so much of the first efforts to clean it up and save it. I was the first security representative of the board, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. (Jokingly) So over the years I've told people that I own the ship and nobody really blows my cover.

AF: Well, thank you for doing this interview with me!

JH: Well, it's my pleasure. (Joking) Now my left arm has gone completely numb, so I better hang up.

AF: (Laughs) Ok, thank you again, bye.

JH: Bye.

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Original Questions

1. Were you drafted or did you enlist?
2. What made you decide to enlist?
3. Do you have any family that was in the military prior?
4. What steps are involved in enlisting?
5. What branch did you join?
6. What was bootcamp like?
7. Where was it located?
8. How long were you in bootcamp before you were called to war?
9. What was your job in the Marine Corps?
10. What kind of gun (s) did you use?
11. Before enlisting, had you ever handled a gun?
12. How did you feel when you were sent to war?
13. Where in Vietnam were you?
14. Did you receive any major injuries during your time in Vietnam?
15. How about any illnesses?
16. Did you ever come into contact with Agent Orange
17. Are there any missions or attacks that especially stick out in your memory?
18. Were there a lot of casualties in your particular unit?
19. Did your view of the war change once you were a part of it?
20. How long were you in Vietnam fighting?
21. How do you think the Vietnamese felt having the American military there?
22. Did you befriend any Vietnamese?
23. When you were in Vietnam, were you staying on land or were you on your ship?
24. What was it like living on a ship for so long?
25. How was the food?
26. What kind of food?
27. Did you make a lot of friends in your unit?
28. Do you keep in touch with any of them still?
29. Was it hard to get back into civilian life once you came back in 1969?
30. Are you involved with the USS Hornet Museum?