

Winter 12-7-2016

A Medic's Point of View in Vietnam

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Recommended Citation

Ackerman, Kade, "A Medic's Point of View in Vietnam" (2016). *Vietnam*. 17.
<https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/vietnam/17>

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The interview was conducted in one session on October 3, 2016 and lasted approximately fifty minutes. It was conducted in the home of David Gifford in Galt, CA. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About David Gifford:

David Gifford was born in Palo Alto, USA in 1946 and spent most of in life moving from town to town in Northern California. He went to college and became a teacher. He married his wife Lois and they settled down in Lodi, California. He was a part of the Vietnam War that started in 1954, and was a medic for the Army in the Vietnam War. This interview covered topics ranging from the first days at Vietnam to doing operations on injured soldiers.

Interviewer: Kade Ackerman (KA)

Interviewee: David Gifford (DG)

KA: When the Vietnam War began, when and how did you become a part of the war?

DG: Well, I was a graduate student at UC Davis working towards a PHD in Physics and got drafted, and just before they did the lottery with us, they drew dates out of a hat I guess, and so I got drafted and they gave me a one-year. Well I got to finish the school year and so then went to Fort Sam Houston as a conscientious objector basic training there and medical training, and was stationed at Fort Sam Houston. Thought I was going to spend all my time there and they told me I was so Lois and I got engaged, and turns out they sent me to Vietnam (chuckles lightly) and that's how I got involved.

KA: So because you were drafted, were you kind of nervous because you didn't want to go to Vietnam at all?

DG: I defiantly didn't want to go to Vietnam, didn't really want to go to the Army, but you look back at it and recognize that, uh, God guides in your life and I had experiences in the military that were very faith building, and some that I probably could have grown more than I did (chuckles lightly) so yeah I was not a happy camper but uh tried to cooperate most of the time.

KA: When you when to Vietnam what group were you a part of?

DG: I was with the 62nd medical detachment in Vietnam.

KA: When you went to that division did you chose that division or were you assigned there?

DG: I was just assigned to go there, uh the trip over was on a commercial airline, but they had the stewardess, I think were karate trained (both of us chuckle). They weren't you usual group of people, and I found I think everybody on the plane was scared but they talk tough. And so we landed in Cam Ranh Bay, and that's where we were assigned from, and I was assigned to third field hospital in Saigon.

KA: What was your occupation in the war?

DG: I worked on a surgical floor for about six weeks and we had twelve-hour days, six days a week, and after six weeks I got transferred into a urology clinic, which was a much nicer place to work. We had normally about eight hour days, and half day on Friday or excuse me half day on Saturday, but I had a very good doctor that I worked with and I didn't have to work Saturdays except if there's an emergency, and he was Jewish so he understood Sabbath.

KA: Yeah. So when you first got to Vietnam, can you recall the first couple of days and what it was like out there?

DG: Uh yeah it was in Cam Ranh Bay, where we were waiting to get our assignments and the first night they were shooting off all kinds of flares throughout around the base. They had said they had seen some activity not too far away and that was very impressive for new people coming in (both of us have a small laugh). And we just did, uh, they would send us on work details and stuff while we were there, and yeah it was uh I guess I was anxious to know where to go because there were a lot of different situations and places where you would go out and chase the North Vietnamese right out into the boondocks, and just waiting for problems, and so yeah. We had formations a couple of times a day where we had to stand in formation and then they would call out names of people that were being sent somewhere, and if you didn't get called you were on work detail to work on the roads or whatever they had. It was very very sandy so the roads had metal things that were wired together for the vehicles to drive on so we were out repairing those and keeping the roads good.

KA: Aside from the first couple of days take me through a regular day at camp.

DG: Ok well I was in the surgical work in the days that I mentioned about the twelve-hour so you get there and well, before six in the morning and get off at six in the evening and there was a postop so you would work with people that take care of wound care and just anything that they need there. When I first arrived in the hospital they sent us on a rotation so we went through different wards, they had burned wards and it's rather interesting. I was a medic, but in Fort Sam Houston, I was able to get into a television station because I had a degree in Physics and so I did no medical work at all except for the training I had which was ten weeks and one lecture. There are three items of furniture in every hospital room: a bed, a bedside stand, and a chair, private, so and so "how many articles of furniture are there?" That went on for about two hours and was very high-level education (both

of us laugh). So when I got over there they are expecting that I know what I'm doing and I didn't know what I was doing and the first patient that I worked on was a person that had their kneecap blown off, and you could see both the bones coming down into the knee area and it had to be cleaned out, and I think they assigned that to me because they knew I was new, and the patient was really good. He said, "no you have to get over there and you got to get down in that area and get that cleaned out..."

KA: Oh wow.

DG: But after about, I don't know, maybe forty-five seconds they gave me a chair (chuckles lightly). I guess I was pretty pale but anyway on the surgical work it was you know changing bandages and colostomy bags and that type of thing. In the urology clinic, probably, well they did a lot of uh kidney problems and that type of thing. There was a lot of venereal disease and due to the activities of soldiers there, so that was another thing that needed to be treated. They did vasectomies (chuckles), which doesn't sound like a wartime operation, they did circumcisions...

KA: Man they did it all.

DG: Part of that was because again of the activity, they get diseases from and such, so they ended up having, but I didn't assist with any kidney operations, but I did assist prostate surgeries and that type of thing. So the clinic was a good place to work. The doctor was great and worked with one Vietnamese man but he did the x-rays.

KA: When you were at camp was your station ever on the front lines at all?

DG: No I was in the field hospital, and that's the hospital they bring soldiers in and sometimes it was an emotional experience because they would bring in a group of people, and some of them were more badly injured than others, and I was working on a fellow who said that they had been chasing the Viet Cong around in the jungle out there and his barracks slept in a little too late one morning and caught a bunch of border fire and he had gotten flack in his rear end, and he was actually crying because he said "I didn't get hurt bad enough, and if I would have gotten hurt worse I could go home but now in two weeks. I'm going to be back out there with the rest of my time chasing these people that they just wait until they get us in a bad spot and then we have trouble," and you know probably somebody early twenties, and not knowing if there going to get to come home.

KA: So were there soldiers that told you they didn't want to be healed so they wouldn't have to go back out and fight?

DG: Well, I don't think I ran into that too much but they would've been happy if they didn't have to go back out, and then there were some other ones that, I don't know, their mentality was go out and get them, and I worked with one fellow who

was actually working as a medic, and he loved going out in the choppers and uh, he had been shot while in a chopper going down to rescue people, and so some were gung ho, I was not. (Chuckles lightly)

KA: While you were there, how difficult was it to keep the Sabbath while the war was going on?

DG: Well, that's where I worked on the ward, and we had twelve-hour six days a week. Everybody wanted weekends off, and I know that being in the medical core, it was expected that you could work on Sabbath, but this was an important Adventist hospital where you would do a bunch of stuff on Friday and get it cleaned up like mopping the floors, and that sort things, but it was business as usual, but while the six weeks that I was on the ward that only worked on Sabbath, I was able to work Sundays instead, and that was one thing that was interesting. Every time I transferred to a new place, I was always hoping it was early in the week so that I could work for three or four days and they could get to know my work ethic and know who I was before I needed to approach them about Sabbath...

KA: Right.

DG: and that didn't always happen, but in the urology clinic. I got there on Monday, and on Thursday I approached the doctor and said "I'm Seventh-day Adventist," and he said "oh, you want Saturday off" and I said "yes sir, but if there's an emergency I'll be glad to help," and he said "but you would rather have it off, right?" (chuckles lightly) I said "yes sir" and he said "you got it," and then he told me that he had been doing a lot of work in the Adventist mission hospital because the Army restricted how many local Vietnamese people they could help because they wanted to keep the beds open for emergencies for the Army, and this doctor was drafted, so it may actually be that he got his training through the Military. I don't know, but I got the idea that he was drafted, and so he was wanting to help people, and he would go down to the head hospital and would say "well, are we helping them die or helping them live today?" So they couldn't help a lot of the people they wanted to, so they got in contact with the Seventh-day Adventists there who had a little hospital, and they would go over, and the Wednesday night before I got there, the Adventist nurses invited himself and another doctor that had done a lot of surgeries at their hospital, and they had stayed up until midnight talking about what Seventh-day Adventist believed in, and they said, "oh, by the way, there's a new Seventh-day Adventist over at the hospital," and I have often thought, what if I hadn't asked for Sabbath off? He was expecting it, and God prepared, but there were other times where I would arrive late in the week, and I was able to get it off, but it wasn't always pleasant, and sometimes there was some derision, and a few other things that went along with it, but Sabbath was a great day. Like when I was in Cam Ranh Bay on Friday evening, we were all in formation, and I got called for KP, and nobody likes KP. We worked long hours and so they counted us off, and I said "I'm Seventh-day Adventist" and I refused to do KP, and well, no one wanted to do KP, and the person in charge said "look at this guy, you know these churches

if they don't watch out there going to tell them they can't even breathe," and I said "I'd be happy to come back tomorrow night, you got my name, I'll be happy to do it tomorrow night, but I can't do it tonight," he let me go and they never called me back, so I got out of KP (both of us laugh). So I went and spent the whole day in the chapel because I didn't want to be walking around, because I'd get grabbed for something, so those are experiences that build your relationship with God, that he's going to be with you, and my assignment there was a really good one.

KA: How did the other medical staff and soldiers treat you?

DG: I was treated well, probably the closest experience that I know of being in danger was in our own barracks, uh, soldiers would go out and get drunk, and they would come in Saturday night, and one Saturday night a guy came in drunk about midnight hollering about airborne, and wondered what airborne was, and all this stuff, and one of my bunkmates tried to calm him down, and the guy wasn't going to get calmed down, and he went to his locker and pulled out a gun, and I was in my bunk, and here these guys were fighting him six feet away, and I didn't know if I should stay in the bunk or crawl underneath or what (he starts to laugh), but after that, the Adventist servicemen center was a huge blessing. It was only about six blocks away, and they invited me to come and actually live at the servicemen center, and the doctor that I worked for again said "I know where you are, and if anything comes up, I can get ahold of you," so I actually lived in the Adventist servicemen center for about five month's, and so, that was good.

KA: How did you keep your morale high during the war?

DG: (Chuckles softly) Recognizing that everyday was one day less, I had to stay there and knowing that I could have been in a lot worse situation than I was in, so that was helpful. I don't know, there were times I was up and down, and one thing that happened was the U.S. Government was wanting American civilians to leave the country, and this was in 1972, and the final actual leaving was in '75, but the Viet Cong were coming down from the North, and gradually working their way down, and we weren't really allowed to keep them from doing in a serious way, and so they took away APO number, which was a mailing number for the Adventist hospital, and they had a lot of people in the United States that were sending them supplies, and so they couldn't get those, and so these boxes of supplies were building up back in the U.S. and they needed a way to get them there, and a couple of the nurses came to me and said "could we send them to you, and then you bring them to the hospital?" And I said "well as long as you send a couple of packages at a time." The first shipment arrived, and these were boxes that were probably two feet by eighteen inches, and they were pretty good size boxes, and there were twelve of them, and so here I have to truck trips up to the ward where I was working full of stuff from home, and everybody was wondering why I wasn't passing out cookies to everyone (chuckles lightly), and so I said to the nurses that "hey you can't do this, you know; send them a package at a time, but I can't have a dozen of these." Well a few days later, a guy from the mailroom came up and he said, "Gifford I don't

know what's going on, but I think you're pretty straight," and he said "a bunch of packages came in, and one of them broke open and a bunch of pills fell out," and he said "I was stuffing them back in trying to get the box packed up when the charged officer came into the mailroom, and saw them," and he said "they got the box" he says "they don't know there are eleven more" he says (while laughing) "can you come down and get them?" And so I got ahold of the nurses, and we got those out of there, but a couple hours later I got called down to the company's commanders office, and here was the guy from the criminal investigating division, and he said "Gifford we need to go downtown," and I said "oh, I don't think so," I said "I can explain this, uh, no need to go downtown," (chuckles lightly) so we went downtown, and we walk in, and see this deck, and so and so criminal investigator, and he said "ok we got your pills found in your mail, what's going on?" And so I told them and he says, "are you aware code such and such and it says you're not supposed to let anyone else use your APO number?" And I said, "well I figure it was given to me," he said "that's not what I asked. Were you aware of that code?" And I said "no sir," and so I explained what was going on. I had never stopped to think, and so the first batch they opened them up, and they were rubber gloves, and other stuff like that, and I didn't stop to think what would happen if someone found these, and so after I was done talking to the investigator, a guy poked his head in the door and said "sir, those are birth control pills. Do you want me to make up an evidence board?" He laughed and said "I don't think that will be necessary," and he said "your company commander will let you know what your punishment is," and so a few weeks later I got told I was supposed to go down to the hospital administrators office, and so I thought, well, here comes the bad news, and so I went down and walked in the door, and everybody in an outfit was in there like they showed up for a hanging, and so the general was there, the hospital commander, and nurses and everybody else, and the general came to me and said "Gifford, how would you like to go home for Christmas?" (he laughs) "Oh, I'd like that," and he said "how soon can you be ready?" And I said "I'm ready now," he said "well, your wife won some kind of a contest, and you're going home for two weeks, and your plane leaves at ten in the morning." So they said "are you sure you don't have some things you need to take care of?" And what I found out later was they had seen me leave in the evening going to the servicemen center, and they thought I was living in the town with somebody, and that I would have to have some things taken care of, and so I thought that was kind of funny because they would see me leave, and then come back in the morning, and so I thought I should check with my company commander to find out what's going on with this other stuff, you know I don't want to be back in the States and have something going on when I'm not there, so I went in and he said "c'mon in Gifford" he said "are you religious?" And I said "I think people would say I'm religious," he says "have you ever heard 'render unto Caesar what is Caesars?" I said "yes sir," he said "Gifford, you've been messing with Caesars stuff," he said "don't do it anymore, and get out of here because if you miss that plane you're going to be in a lot of trouble," and just as I was leaving he said "don't be such a nice guy," which I thought was pretty good, so that was a bright spot, and I got to come home got to spend two weeks here, and it was a McDonald's

department store that had a contest that Lois had entered to bring a serviceman home for Christmas...

KA: Oh wow.

DG: We spent the night in Saint Frances hotel in San Francisco, and she got a \$300 gift certificate to McDonald's Department Store, and we could've gone to the Rose Bowl, but the parade was on Sabbath, so we passed that up, and so when I went back I took my saxophone and my racket with me, and it kind of tells you what kind of experience I had there.

KA: So when you were back in Vietnam did you get to meet the people or learn any of their language while staying there?

DG: I think most of the Vietnamese I learned turned out to be French (he laughs), and that was because before we got into the country, it was called French Indochina that had governed it, and they were running into all kinds of problems, and with communism, and that type of thing, so they pulled out, and I didn't do my homework before I went, but after I got back, I did some reading and found out why the protests were going on back here in the United States. It appears that when the French pulled out, the communists wanted to take over, and we didn't want that to happen. We had that domino effect thing going that they were going to march around the world one place at a time, and so what we did was we made an agreement that we would give them a year to get things settled out, and to have a fair election, and when we found out that the communist were in the election, we went in and stayed in, and we had advisors before that, and so I think there was some real reason why people were concerned that we should've been over there, and we lost over 50,000 people to death, and a whole bunch more were injured for being over there, and I think you could say that we didn't accomplish much, and that's a sad loss of life.

KA: So, how were you and the other soldiers treated when you returned home?

DG: Uh, not well, but I was still glad to be back, I think, I know that now we are treated much better than we were then, and there were a lot of us who were drafted and didn't want to be there, but were there because the country said you go, and so you didn't say too much about it when you got back, but now it's different and that's good.

KA: Did you make any close friendships while you were there?

DG: Yeah I did. I actually ran into several people there that I knew relatives of back in the States, but I can't really say that I have kept in touch. Occasionally, I'll run into the relatives and ask about them, and I'll follow them, but I'm not a big Facebook fan or anything like that, but I've kind of kept track of some that came back and teachers like I was. You make some friendships in basic training since

you're all going through the same stuff, but it's amazing people that would never get together in a normal life become good friends just because you're in the same experience, and when you leave, your lives tend to go back to where they were, and I think about them, but I haven't seen too many. There's one that I just found out is up in Washington, and we were going to try and get together at camp meeting, but it didn't work out, but will probably will sometime. He's a great big guy that did some of the leadership in basic training, and that type of thing for our group, and a nice guy, but glad it's over.

KA: So, out of that experience do you have a favorite memory of a funny moment?

DG: Well, I think the experience of going down and finding out that I was going home for Christmas was currently a huge thing, and it was right in the middle of the time I was there, and when we were processing out, I actually got a two month early out because they were starting to close things down, so it was amazing. I was sent over because, usually, you had to have at least a year left in service to go, and I only had nine and a half months, and then I ended up two months early out, so I was there for seven and a half months, but as I was processing out they said there's a problem with your paper work, and if you want we'll hold up the paper work for a few days, and you get another month of combat pay, I think it was \$85 or something, and I said "how fast can you get the paper work fixed?" (Both of us laugh) We flew out of Long Binh which was about thirty miles North of the hospital where I was at, and we were in a great big corrugated building on the airbase, and I'm sure they probably did this once a day, but some clown went out and threw a couple of big rocks up on the top of that building and it went BANG, BANG, BANG, everybody in the place was flat on the floor, but looking back it was supposed to be funny. We got in the plane, and it was just dead silence until we got to about 10,000 feet, and everybody said "yes." When we got back, we landed at Travis Force Base in California, and when I got out I kissed the ground, I was glad to be back in California, and I probably made a mistake, when they were processing us, they gave us a new dress uniform, and they would say "how does that fit?" And I would say perfect. (both of us laugh) So, the uniform that I checked out didn't fit pretty well, and moths got into it anyway, so after you get out, you have another four years of inactive reserve that they can call you up, and I got called up for a couple of weeks to go down to camp Roberts, and supposed to help tear down a base they don't use anymore, and I found out later that half of our senior class would've been getting drafted, but I think there were only five or six of us out of fifty, but I got drafted right out of graduate school, but didn't understand that one.

KA: What was your takeaway from being at Vietnam?

DG: I think senselessness of war was huge, you no longer kept war movies in the same hero mentality, you recognize everybody make-believe or whatever, takes a bullet, has a family, and people that love them, uh, war has got to be a last resort, people out there shooting each other they don't know each other, they're the enemy, and military people tell you they are not people, and so that's a way to look at it,

otherwise it will wreck your mind. Well, there are a lot of people that wreck minds coming out of it, and the fact that we didn't have people invading our own soil, we, I guess, had ideology that we were concerned about, and I think rightly so, but now I think we have it in our own country (Chuckles lightly), so we're not that far off from government taking money from people that have it and giving it to who don't have it. The work ethic is disappearing, and also, what I take from it is my faith is a lot stronger that God is in control of what happens even though it's not all good to us. He's going to make it good in the end and that's a huge thing.

KA: Well, thank you so much for opening up about your time in Vietnam. I really appreciate it.

DG: You're welcome. I'm sure if I had more direct combat experiences, it might have been a lot harder to talk about, but I'm glad I was able to help some, and would rather not have gone there, and rather avoided the whole military experience, but it was a life experience that has prepared me. There can't be too much that can happen that's going to surprise me after going through the military experiencing the morals that are promoted, or the lack thereof, and what's considered to be normal experience in life that Christians will never have to pay the price for is good.

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