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Oral History: Joseph Macko II

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This interview was conducted in one session on October 27, 2017 over the phone. This interview lasted approximately 51 minutes. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present during the interview.

About Joseph Michael Macko II:

Joseph Michael Macko II was born in the small town of Greensburg, Pennsylvania in 1953, where he lived for 5 years until he moved to Covina California where lived until he joined the Navy. Instead of going to college Joseph served in the Vietnam War from 1973-1975 as a Navy Seabee and in the Navy reserves from 1975-1979. Joseph after his military career took up the sport of body building and has lifted weights ever since. Joseph does not have a college degree and is now a professional electrician using his skills learned from a Navy Seabee to make a living for himself. He finally settled down and married Devra Lee Kelly (Macko) who both have three children; Joseph Michael Macko III, Joshua Lee Macko, and Alanna Marie Macko.

Interviewer: Joshua Macko (JLM)

Interviewee: Joseph Michael Macko II (JMM)

JLM: Let's start out with a couple of basic questions. Did you enlist in the Navy or were you drafted?

JMM: I was actually both. I was a part of the draft lottery, the Government sent me a notice that they were going to draft numbers 1-100 and I was number 36. So before they could draft me in the Army I enlisted in the Navy because I didn't wanna be in the Army (chuckles lightly). I was enlisted as Navy Seabees. It's a shame you don't hear more about the Navy Seabees, we did a lot of good work while I was there and it taught you a lot of valuable skills.

JLM: What made you choose or want to be a Navy Seabee?

JMM: I actually didn't even know what a Seabee was at the time of my enlisting (chuckles). I just knew I didn't want to be a Jarhead, ... or in the Air Force. I thought the Navy sounded like fun. I took an aptitude test and excelled in the mathematics and problem solving section. I was given a choice of joining the Seabees and decided that a Seabee was something I would be interested in doing. It wasn't that I was afraid of fighting or that I was a coconscious objector, it's just if I could do something to increase my chances of coming back in one piece, I was defiantly going to do it.

JLM: Take me through the process of enlisting, was it hard? Were there any tests or requirement that you needed to pass?

JMM: Well, I had to be a U.S. Citizen. I took an aptitude test which was hand written, they wanted me make sure we could read and write, also because they didn't really have computers back in that day (chuckles). I don't remember much, but what I do remember was going into a room full of people and having to swear an oath to defend the U.S. from all enemies, foreign and domestic.

JLM: For how many years did you serve?

JMM: I served two years active, and four years reserve. I thought about serving longer, but since the war had ended by then and I was still young, I wanted to go out and live my life. The original goal was to stay in the service for twenty years and then retire, but after two years, I felt like I already wanted to do something else with my life.

JLM: What boot camp did you attend? What was it like? What did you expect it to be like?

JMM: I went to boot camp in San Diego California called NTC/RTC, which stood for Naval Training Center I believe and Recruit Training Command if I remember correctly. I didn't really know what to expect, I figured that it would be difficult and wouldn't be a vacation to San Diego. The base was all asphalt and very crowded, kind of smelled bad too, but that was probably from all the sweaty guys on base. We were given 3 minute showers once a day, but I have a feeling some of the guys there didn't use that luxury to often (chuckles softly) ... anyways, other than that it was just like your typical military base, my unit of about forty guys shared one of the barracks. It was just one room, not very wide, but decently long, we had bunk beds. It got crowded a lot, but surprisingly it never really smelled in our barracks, my unit and I did a very good job in keeping our barracks in top shape! Believe it or not we actually never failed a room inspection. The only unit at that camp to do so that year.

JLM: A lot of people say that boot camp can be really tough. Take me through a typical day of boot camp. What were your duties there?

JMM: Wake up, Make my bed, military style so it had to be perfect. Went to breakfast which was usually just some form of grits, fruit, sometimes if we got lucky there would be eggs, and they gave usually either bacon or sausage, now I wasn't Christian at the time so I would devour that stuff. After breakfast we were directed to the grinder and would stand there at attention waiting for the commanding officer. 400 of us just standing there in our boondockers. Sometimes we would be standing there for like thirty minutes. At the grinder they would give us our daily activities and chores and we would disperse by unit and do our duties for that day. We mostly went to school, had written tests, and did our PT. It was almost like going to an academy, except our drill instructors weren't there holding our hands like the teachers at academies do. ... Our duties ... I guess you could say our duties were pretty basic, we didn't really have work, just training, but our chores around the base consisted of keeping the barracks clean, washing clothes by hand on a long concrete table. ... that was probably the worst part for me, I hated washing clothes by hand like that, it seemed like it was never ending, sitting out in the hot San Diego sun roasting while trying to do your laundry, let me tell you, not very fun, but I didn't complain, I didn't wanna find out what they did to complainers, chances are I would have found myself doing all the laundry on my own. Besides, I was never really the one to complain when it came to work. ... Now our PT training I actually enjoyed a lot! For our PT training we ran. Oh man we ran a lot, didn't matter rain or shine we always ran. We also did pushups, sit ups, climbed ropes, worked with free weights at the gym they had there, I really enjoyed the free weights

part especially. That is what actually got me interested in taking up body building after the War.

JLM: Wait so you actually enjoyed it? I don't think many people would say that, don't you think? I've always heard that boot camp is rough.

JMM: Ha! Yeah you are probably right, but I am not most people. Boot camp definitely isn't for the faint of heart, but if you take everything you do seriously and respect everyone you can make a lot of friends and have some pretty cool experiences. I think that applies to everything in life actually.

JLM: At what time did you graduate boot camp? Where did you go next?

JMM: I graduated from boot camp in six weeks, and since I scored in the top 1% of my group I received meritorious promotion, which meant instead of having to wait a year to get to my next rank, which was nice actually, I was automatically promoted. Which was nice actually because that meant I could go on to my actual training and not have to stay for another year doing more basic training stuff. ... So After I graduated from boot camp in San Diego, I got a week long leave, I went home, saw my mom, my two sisters and my girlfriend at the time, I hadn't seen them in about two months so it was nice to be able to get together and spend time with them. After my leave I got on a plane and flew to Gulfport, Mississippi, which was one of the homes for the Seabees. It was a pretty cool place, I think it was one of the largest cities in Mississippi at the time, I was stationed at the NCBC, which was the Naval Construction Battalion Center, it was definitely much nicer looking than my base in San Diego, but way more crowded.

JLM: Can you tell me what Gulfport was like? What were some of the things required of you there?

JMM: We did different tasks from plumbing, working on generators, sheet metal, electrical work, and general construction like framing and concrete. I was finally starting to learn what we Seabees were actually going to be doing, I actually enjoyed some of the stuff I was learning, not only was it knowledge that I was going to use here in the military but I felt like I would be able to use this if or when I got back. We also had weapons training, went the rifle range a lot, to honest, I wasn't the best shot, so maybe I was lucky I didn't go into the Army (chuckles softly). We also did night ops training. Which was one of the most stressful things I've ever done in my entire life. ... What they did was put us in combat situations in a fox hole all night under enemy fire, we knew it wasn't real and they were firing blanks, but the intensity was definitely real. Trying to stay alive and accomplish our mission. They told us that just because we were Seabees, that didn't mean we wouldn't see combat, which I mean was the Seabee motto, we build, we fight. That was our motto.

JLM: Oh my! You are right that does sound intense. When did you finish at Gulfport? Were you glad to be done?

JMM: I finished up there in about 12 weeks I believe. I got 2 weeks leave which I spent going home again because this would be the last time I would get to see my family before getting jetted off for Nam. After my they brought me in and prepared to send me off to Vietnam. Was I glad to be done? Uhh.. yeah I was glad to be done at Gulfport, I felt like they had taught me a lot and that I was ready to be done.

JLM: I see, I understand, so when did you get to Vietnam? How did you get there?

JMM: 1974, I took a plane from San Diego to Hawaii, then a plane Hawaii to Guam, and another plane all the way to the Philippines, and then took a military flight to Vietnam, it was a lot of traveling (chuckles). On the bright side, being forced to fly so much helped me get over my fear of flying.

JLM: Where were you stationed in Vietnam? How did you feel about going?

JMM: I was stationed in Ho Chi Minh City, which was known as Saigon. I honestly didn't really want to go, I mean who would? I had a good life back home, I was only 19 years old, I left my family, my girlfriend at the time, so yeah I didn't want to go, it sucked that I had to leave all that behind, but that was the life of someone in the military. At least they told me I probably wouldn't get shot at, that was a little comforting. My unit I was with was in charge of getting civilians out of the city, the war was close to ending at the time so we were just trying to keep peace in the city and keep everyone safe, but you know I was still worried, anything could happen. I feel like there was fear amongst all of us, none of us knew what was gonna happen or what sort of things we would encounter.

JLM: You said that you guys didn't really what to expect heading there, did they not brief you on what the surrounding area was like? Did you have any theories of what you might see or encounter?

JMM: Yes they did give us a briefing, I should have said we didn't fully know what we were going to see or encounter. They showed us videos of where we going so I kind of had an idea, but it was way different when I got there, the video they showed us was filmed in 1968, so a lot had changed. I had honestly expected to see more jungle when I got there, but when I got there it was actually a city full of shops, bars and concrete buildings. It was just like any other city. Granted a lot of this had been built by the U.S. and the U.S. embassy was there along with a military barracks and airport. So I guess you could say Saigon was a city within a city. Hardly any of the civilians if any, had cars though. You would usually see the citizens riding bikes everywhere they went. ... Just like any city though there was a nice side of town, and the side of town that was a dump.

JLM: Staying on the topic of the city, how often were you actually in the city?

JMM: Honestly not very much, I tried to stay out of that city as much as possible, I almost never went in unless I had work to do in the city. I just didn't trust it you know? A lot of us didn't. ... Most of us were afraid of rebelling civilians or maybe an ambush, you never

knew what could have happened, so I thought it was just best to play it safe and stay out of the city.

JLM: You mentioned that you guys were afraid of rebelling civilians and ambushes, were you or anyone you knew ever involved in a heated situation? Such as trouble with the locals?

JMM: uhh ... In the nice part of the city not really, I never really heard of any of the civilians lashing out against us, a lot of them were actually happy that were there, especially for the troops who were spending money at their shops and their bars. They were making money off of us. Now in the ghetto part of town I was talking about I did hear about soldiers sometimes getting robbed, the robbers never got away though. As for myself no, I was lucky enough to be able to avoid those types of situations. I always tried to keep a low profile while I was there, that is one of the reasons I never went to bars either.

JLM: So as a Seabee, what were your responsibilities as in Vietnam? Take me through a typical day for you. What sort of duties were required of you?

JMM: I worked a lot in communications, I made sure that we had lighting and that the base had power, I fixed generators when they went out, and I helped install the telephone lines. Not the most glamorous of all jobs, but it was my job so I took it very seriously. I was very thankful for my job. For one, I knew that I was doing a good service, the base wouldn't have functioned without us Seabees there I believe and second, I was never asked to do something I didn't want to do, everything they asked of me was completely agreeable, and within my power to do so, I understand not everybody gets that lucky so I was extremely fortunate. I wouldn't say my job was much fun though, I don't wanna make it sound like I was having a blast. It was still hard work.

JLM: Speaking of fun, did you ever have time for recreational activities? What did you and the other soldiers do for fun?

JMM: Well I usually, stayed away from the clubs because I wasn't a big drinker, but I mean they had a basketball hoop at base so sometimes some of the soldiers would play. We would make teams and play against each other, which was always a good time. ... They had a gym which is where I spent most of my time. Like I said earlier in boot camp I really enjoyed using the free weights so when I found out they had a gym on base camp that is where I ended up spending most of time. They also had movies, a bunch of soldiers would crowd in this little room and watch a flick from time to time. So I guess it wasn't all bad, besides how hot it was and whether or not you would get ambushed. It was nice having all those things there, it really helped keep your mind off what was happening and it gave you a little piece of home. Which is what I liked most about it.

JLM: There have been cases in war where armies have had to deal with deserters, or people lashing out against their commanding officers, did you witness any of this?

JMM: I was around a lot of guys who were very unhappy that is for sure, but never to the extent of that type of insubordination. Like I had said before the war was ending so people

were just anxious to get home, they had no reason to jeopardize that now. People were starting to fly out, so it was clear that we were going to pull out of Nam soon. I'll tell you though, out of everyone I knew, no one wanted to be there. ...

JLM: Did it ever get lonely while you were at boot camp or Vietnam? Or did you make enough friends to be able to keep you company?

JMM: uhh ... yes and no, I mean I made friends, we hung out, and I got letters from my girlfriend back home, but at the same time, I really missed being home, I hadn't seen my family in a while and even though my mom never wrote to me because she was too occupied with her new husband, I still wanted to see her ... it was tough being so far from home (sad tone). It hurt not getting letters from my mom. I remember hearing soldiers talk about how getting letters from back home was the best part of their weeks. They weren't wrong, it gave a sense of connection to back home. It would have been much tougher to make it through `Nam, without those letters from my girlfriend.

JLM: Did any of your friends see combat?

JMM: Most of my friends, no, but, I didn't really try to make friends with the people who went out and had the best opportunity to find combat, because I knew it would be hard for me to deal with if they didn't come back and at times I saw soldiers grieving because one of their friend didn't come back and I knew that ... I just knew that I didn't want a part in that. War is Hell. The ones [Seabees] that did see combat though, the combat was very minimal. Since the war was ending no one was really looking to fight anymore, any of the combat that happened where I was either by rebelling civilians or a few rebels.

JLM: Alright so we talked a lot about what you did in Vietnam and what some of your experiences were, but can you tell me how did serving in Vietnam change you? Like how did it influence or impact your life?

JMM: It gave me a different perspective on life, at home I would wake up, go to work, then go workout and then go to the beach and hang out with friends. I guess you could say I was an irresponsible teenager. Coming back from the war, from Vietnam it just gave me a new perspective on life ... I no longer thought that life was all fun and games, seeing the destruction in Vietnam and seeing fellow soldiers grieving for friends they had lost, it changes a man, it put the fear in me like, hey, I could be next. Just coming away from my whole military experience, it really changed me. It cleaned up my act, made me more responsible, and made me value life more. Also I feel like if I wouldn't have gone I never would have become Christian. With my new view on life I decided to start going to church, and I became Christian, it wasn't until I met my wife that I became Adventist. Anyways, yeah I feel like if you asked anyone they would say the war changed them.

JLM: When did you come back from Vietnam? How did you adjust back to life in the U.S.? Coming back to the U.S. after two years in Vietnam must have been refreshing.

JMM: I came back to the U.S. in late 1975, they brought me straight back to California, but my tour wasn't necessarily over, I was sent to the Naval Shipyards in San Diego, called the NMCB, where I spent the last six months of my tour. So I was still in the military when I got back, but I'll tell you, it was much nicer being in San Diego than back in Nam. So I was glad to be back. My family was able to come visit and I was able to go out, so I much preferred being home.

JLM: You mentioned the NMCB, what it that?

JMM: It was the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion, it was the Unit I was in while stationed in San Diego, M.C.B.4 was my unit, or the fabulous 4 is what we were called. I had a lot of fun with those guys, 3 guys in my unit I still keep in contact with today, I wish they would have been stationed in Saigon with me (chuckles softly).

JLM: Why were you called the fabulous four?

JMM: Ha! I am glad you asked, it was just something we named ourselves, after the Beatles since they were called the Fab Four. We were big fans of the Beatles so it seemed like a fitting name for us, looking back on it, I'll say that name is not as clever as we thought, but it gave us a few laughs so it was worth it.

JLM: So what was the first thing you did when you left the service? What did your friends do? Did you keep in contact with any of them?

JMM: I went out and bought myself a motorcycle, you didn't get paid much for being in the military at the time so most of my money went to that motorcycle. I didn't really keep in contact with the friends I made, I mean I saw them a weekend a month for 4 years since I was in the army reserves, but I didn't hang out with them much because most of them went out and spent all their money on alcohol. A lot of veterans did, poor guys. I was one of the lucky ones who didn't feel the need for alcohol after the war. Becoming a Christian helped with that too, I felt a higher purpose, and so instead of going out and wasting my money, I bought an awesome motorcycle.

JLM: Good choice! I would have done something similar. So what was life like after the War? You said you were in the Navy Reserves? What was that like?

JMM: It was okay, being in the Navy reserves was pretty cool, like I said before we met up once a month, to do work for the whole week, we would go the Naval Reserve Center in Pomona California. We didn't always meet there though, several times we met at a military base in the Californian Mountains which actually used to be an old Japanese internment camp back in World War II. We would also meet on various aircraft carriers to do work. I did that for about 4 years after my 2 year term with the military was up. I was glad that I was done though, it was time to do something else with my life.

JLM: You mentioned that you wanted to do something else with your life, did being a Seabee and your time in the military affect your career choice?

JMM: Yes, absolutely it did. Before the service I was working at a gas station and working on cars. I contemplated college, I was going to go for engineering, but college just didn't sound like me. Being in the Seabees and being over in Nam, taught me valuable skills that I was able to use when I got out of the service. I actually was able to become an electrical engineer without having to go to college because I learned in The Navy. I knew how to work on generators, telephone lines, air conditioning, I knew how to do all of these great skills because of what the military taught me. It also helped that back then, you didn't need a fancy degree to get a good job; you could just show that you could do the work (chuckles). So yeah I would defiantly say that my time in the military and my time in Nam affected my career choice. It affected it for the better.

JLM: Glad to hear it! Okay final question, would you, if you could, stopped yourself from going to Vietnam?

JMM: Honestly? No, even though I didn't like that I had to go, and I wished I could have been home, I feel like that my whole Vietnam experience shaped me into who I am today. Without my experience in `Nam, I probably would have never become a Christian, which means I never would have met my beautiful wife which means I never would have become Adventist either, and I would have never gotten the experience I needed to have a successful career outside the military. ... So yeah Vietnam was terrible, and I didn't enjoy it while I was there, I'm pretty sure no one did, but the experience I gained from it and how it made me a better person is too good to give up. ... Oh, and I most likely wouldn't of have the kids I have today. There are not too many things I regret in my life, because everything has shaped me into the man I am today.

JLM: Thank you so much for your time! It truly means a lot.

JMM: It is no problem at all, I am glad I could share my life story with you and even a testimony on how I became Adventist.