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Vietnam Oral History - Michael Vest

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HIST 155, Fall 2016 / Vietnam War Oral History - Lindsey Clute

Student Interviewers Name: Lindsey Clute

Interviewee Name: Michael Vest

Time and Location of Interview: 11:15 A.M. - Greenbrier, TN

This interview was conducted on October 23, 2016 and lasted approximately an hour and fifteen minutes. It took place in the home of Michael Vest, 66, in Greenbrier, TN. The interviewer, interviewee, and the interviewees spouse were present at the time of the interview.

About Michael Vest:

Michael Vest was born in 1950. He lived most of his life in Jeffersonville, IN. Vest served as a medic in the Vietnam Conflict for 14 months. This interview covered many topics including living conditions and hardships. It was conducted on October 23, 2016 in his home in Greenbrier, TN.

Interviewer: Lindsey Clute (LC)

Interviewee: Michael Vest (MV)

Spouse of Interviewee: Julie Vest (JV)

LC: To get started, let's talk about how you got involved with the war. Did you enlist or were you drafted?

MV: Well when I registered for the draft, because at the time, we had to go in and register for the draft when you turned eighteen. Well I registered for the draft and I registered as a conscientious objector. Not objecting to serving my country, but I would not carry a weapon. Because of the example Desmond Doss showed in World War II, they would let those that believed for, either religious reasons or other reasons that they couldn't take another person's life, to register as conscientious objectors. Well I came home one morning and I sat down with my folks and I said, "I'm gonna go move my draft up. Gonna do what I have to do. If I make it back in one piece, I'll use the G.I. Bill and go to school." Because I was tired of school. I graduated from high school in '68 from Andrews Academy. I was tired of school. Did not know what I wanted to do, so I went ahead and went down to the draft board, told 'em to move my name up and two days later I had a letter that said, "Greetings, come and see us." And so, in December of '68 I went into the army. Uh, went through my basic and A.I.T. training at Fort Chain, Houston, Texas. And from there I went straight to Vietnam. And uh, was assigned to first infantry division at Vietnam and served 10 and a half months in the field as a frontline medic with the first infantry division.

JV: In those days, you could be enlisted or you be, um, drafted. Or if you saw that you wanted to, you could just move your draft up, and so that's what he did.

LC: How long did you serve?

MV: I went in December of '68, and came home July the 4th, 1970.

JV: So, he was there for 14 months.

MV: Well, it was a little over 14 months. I was in Vietnam for 14 months. But I had to go through basic and A.I.T. and everything before I went to Vietnam.

LC: Can you tell me what was going through your head when you first found out that you were going to serve?

MV: I was ready to go do it (chuckles lightly).

JV: He was thinking, you know, they're going to draft me anyway, I'm going to go ahead and get it over with and then use the G.I. Bill to go to school. And I want to help my country, but I don't want to get my education, have something happen to me, and then spend all the money and leave my parents responsible.

LC: I've read a lot of stories about men being sworn in. What was that experience like for you?

MV: When I was at the induction center in Louisville, after they swore us all in, the sergeant was walking along and he was tapping all of the big guys on the shoulder and he said, "You're gonna be a marine, and you'll be a marine." And he came up and put his hand on my shoulder and he says, "You're gonna be a marine." And I said "I can't be a marine." And he said, "Well, why can't you?" And I said, "Because I'm a conscientious objector. I don't object to serving my country but I'm not gonna carry a weapon." And his answer was, "That's okay, you can be a marine. They'll change your mind." And I said, "No, they won't change my mind." And this went back and forth for a few minutes. And I asked him I said, "Why are you insisting for me to go and be a marine when I will not pick up a weapon? I'll end up being court marshal and have a dishonorable discharge, and it will affect the rest of my life." And he says, "No, you'll be a marine." And the whole time I'm praying, you know, let me say the right thing. And there was a corpsman at the induction center that was overhearing this conversation. So, he went and got the commander of the induction center, the officer that was in charge of it. And he came in and he goes, "Is there a problem here?" And the sergeant says, "No, no problem." And he looked at me and he says, "Is there a problem?" And I say, "Yes sir. The sergeants telling me I need to be a marine and I can't be a marine because I'm a conscientious objector." And he goes, "Well what do you base that on?" And I said, "It's based on the fact that I was raised to believe in serving my country and serving my fellow man, but I was also raised to believe that I shouldn't take another person's life." He looked at the sergeant and he says, "This boy won't be marine. Pick somebody else." And that to me was an answer to prayer that I was doing what I felt he [God] wanted me to do.

LC: What was the training like that you had to go through?

MV: When I went to Fort Sam, we did 6 weeks of basic training which taught you the military drills and code of conduct and so forth for the military. You know, you had to do your PT and all that stuff to see that you could pass, be physically fit to do it. And then from basic we went to A.I.T. And the difference between your regular army, the ones that train with weapons and the ones of us that didn't, we did 6 weeks of basic where the other ones did 8 weeks. And then they would do 10 weeks of advanced individual training, which

is where they would either be a rifleman or a, you know, mechanic or something of that nature. And the corpsman went through 12 weeks of, basically it's what an EMT or a paramedic trains with now. We had to learn IV's and all the different things that we would have to do in a combat situation where we would have somebody wounded and we would have to try to take care of them.

LC: What locations were you stationed at?

MV: Basic training and my A.I.T. was at Fort Sam. When I went to Vietnam I was in Lai Khe, that was our base camp, but we stayed out in the field more than we were at the base camp. And then I was transferred to the 20th engineers in Pleiku, which is in the Central Highlands.

LC: I've heard many stories of how soldiers go quite a while out in the field without coming back to camp. Did you have to deal with this kind of situation?

MV: When I was first in Lai Khe we would go out and we'd be out in the field anywhere from a week to a month without seeing a base camp. They would bring helicopters out and resupply us with C-rations and so forth. They'd bring jugs of water out for us but we could be out for a whole week or more without ever seeing the base camp. And you wore the same clothes you had on the first day you left (chuckles). Unless they rotted and fell apart we didn't change clothes. We wore the same grungy fatigues for a week to a month.

LC: When you say you're in the field, does that mean you were actually at war or was this just training you?

MV: No, we were actually in the jungle, moving from point to point or we would set up an ambush at night. And along the trail that we knew the Vietnamese were moving along, we would set up an ambush area and we might be there for a day or two. And then they would bring helicopters in and we get on helicopters and they would fly us to another place or we would just walk from one area to another carrying all of our gear and everything to set up an ambush at another place. I mean, it was just a continual movement. My job with them was just to try to take care of them and make sure they stay healthy. First thing on Monday's, we'd go out and give everybody malaria tablets to fight malaria. Then on Tuesday morning I'd give everybody another tablet, because the malaria tablets gave them diarrhea so we end up giving them something to stop the diarrhea. But I would take care of somebody breaking out in a rash, I'd have to treat them for the rash. And then when we would make contact, if somebody got shot or whatever, then I would have to take care of them.

LC: Did your responsibilities or your job change at all from the beginning of your service to the end or did it remain the same?

MV: Well, as I got more rank I had more responsibilities put on me. When I got to Vietnam I was at E3 then I went from an E3 to an E4, which was a corpsman with a specific platoon. And then I went to E5 which made me a senior aid man because as medics that were there longer rotated out and came home, they just kind of moved us up in the

structure of it. So, when I became a senior aid man, I had, like, three corpsmen under me for the different platoons and stuff. And then I was with the company commander and there was usually two or three of us in the field at the same time.

LC: How did you survive as far as food goes when you were out in the field?

MV: We had C-rations. Some of the boxes of C-rations that they threw off the helicopters when we would get resupplied were packaged in 1942. And here it was 1968. They were housed from WW2. We would all kind of scramble to get certain things. Me not being a vegetarian, they had beef steak patties. We would take C4, which is an explosive, and we would break off a chunk of it and light a match to it and then we would take the beef steaks and put them on the bayonet. And then we would take tabasco sauce and put tabasco sauce on them and then grill them in the field, cooking them that way. We always tried to get the pound cake and fruit cocktail because you could take the juice from the fruit cocktail and pour it over the pound cake and it softened it up. And it was a good desert. They had what they called date nut bread which you could knock somebody out with (laughs) because it was so dry and hard that it was inedible. There was an assortment of things that you could eat.

JV: What about Kool-Aid?

MV: My mother would write me almost daily. And she would send me packages of pre-sweetened Kool-Aid. And I carried a couple of two-quart canteens. I could take the package of pre-sweetened Kool-Aid and put it in my canteen and shake it up and I had a nice drink. And actually, it would make it cooler at night for some reason. At night, it would cool down some, it actually tasted cooler, but it made it drinkable. Otherwise, the water was nasty.

LC: I've heard that sometimes when men come back from war they can't bring themselves to eat or drink certain things again. Is there anything that you're not able to eat or drink now because of the war?

MV: I don't know if I've had any of it since I've been back. I think when I was with the national guard up in Michigan I think we had C-rations a couple of times. Now they have what they call MRE's.

LC: What was the most stressful part of your job?

MV: Being eighteen and young. The first person that I had to take care of, or the first person that I lost I should say, was a dog handler. We were on patrol and the dog tripped a landmine. And when I got him, he had actually taken the dog and pulled him up to him. And I (chokes up) did everything I could to save the young man's life. He had multiple chest wounds. And then he also had head injury. I did what I could, I lost him. I did CPR on him, got him back, and then I lost him again. There were other ones that were injured from the mine. I had been telling other guys, "Take this, put pressure on that," as I was working on this young man. When we got him on a helicopter, I sat in a field and just cried

(chokes up). And I asked why I was there, at eighteen, without the training I thought I should have had. Some of those things still haunt me to this day.

LC: What did you do to keep in touch with friends and family back home? I've read that all the mail was monitored, was this true?

MV: Actually, you could mail letters for free, so you didn't have to have stamps or anything. And my folks received letters from me written on c-ration boxes (chuckles). Because, you know, we would write something to them and then the next time we got resupplied I would take it to the chopper pilot and say, "Will you send this home for me?" And they would send them home for me. And they, my family, would get pieces of cardboard that had something written on it from me. Now you could not tell them where you were. You couldn't tell them what was going on. I never saw anything where they may have- but they said they used to screen, you know, they had people that screened your letters. And if there was something that could have given your position away, or given away where you were or whatever, they would take sharpies or whatever and block it out so it couldn't be read. But I never saw anything like that from the letters my parents kept that I had written them and stuff. But we did that and then my mom was getting ready to have some pretty serious surgery. And I had gotten a letter from them and was told that she was going in to have this surgery and stuff. I mean they wrote and told me but then because of how long it takes to get your mail and everything, the time had passed and it was right at the time that she was having the surgery. And it bothered me, so I got permission to go to the rear and they had what they call MARS station. And what it was, was it was hand radio operators. You could give them the number that you wanted to call, and they would contact a hand radio operator closest to where you were trying to call. And then that hand radio op would call the number and reverse the charges to that number. So, like if I was calling a hand radio operator say he was in Louisiana, well he would reverse the charges to whoever I was calling and there would be a phone charge for Louisiana to, you know. But I went back and I called and I knew my dad would be at work. So, I actually called Colgate Palmolive. And the (chokes up), the switchboard operator accepted the charges. They let me talk to my dad. Found out that my mother was fine and everything was going okay, so I went back to the field the next day, but I thought that was pretty special. When you say something, or ask a question or whatever you would say, "over." And the hand radio operator would flip the switch so they could hear and then dad could talk back to me and he'd say, "over." And they'd flip the switch so it would transmit back time. And you only had, like, two minutes that you could talk. They limited your time to two minutes and that's all that you could talk. But I was able to do that a couple times and talk to my folks to let them know. Other than that, we would just communicate by letters. And like I said, my mom would send me Kool-Aid. They asked me, for nineteenth birthday, they asked me if there was anything special that I would like to have on my nineteenth birthday to eat. And I told my folks, "I'd love to have chili dogs." Well, you can't very well send beef hotdogs, so they sent me Big Franks, couple cans of Big Franks, and Hormel's beef chili. All of the guys in my unit had chili dogs. Of course, the hamburger buns they sent were shredded by the time they got there. But we were actually in the rear when the

care package came. And I opened it up and had all the guys that, you know, I was in the field with, they all had vegetarian hotdogs with Hormel's chili on top of it (chuckles).

LC: That's an amazing story. So, did you receive any awards or metals? If so, what were they for and what did you do to get them?

MV: I received a purple heart, two bronze stars, an air medal, a combat medical badge, the National Guard civil defense ribbon, and Vietnam service ribbons and stuff. But the primary medals were the purple heart, the bronze stars, and the air medal. The air medal is based on air assaults at a combat during insertion in combat situation by helicopter. And I think, actually, it was the air medal with an oak leaf, which means there was a second award, because I had so many hours. I mean, it's based on the number of hours, I think, that you have.

LC: Was there down time during your time in the war? If so what did you do for entertainment?

MV: (laughs) We only got to Zeon once. And we went down, and it was at Christmas time. And we were supposed to get to go see a USO show. And we never got to go see it, but we were all in an NCO club, and there got to be a confrontation between guys that were in the rear that had never seen combat and the guys that were in the field. And it got pretty heated and pretty bad. And we had a boy from Louisiana that stood a head taller than me. He carried our 60-caliber machine gun, he was a great big guy. These two MPS came busting through the door, and he grabbed each one of them and smacked their heads together; picked them up by their pistol belts and walked through the door about of the NCO club and laid them on the ground. And their lieutenant pulled up in his jeep about that time and he looked down at the lieutenant and he said, "I would just stay out here and let the situation be taken care of." It resolved the issue, but the next day we were sent back to the field and we were told we couldn't ever come to Zeon again until we got ready to go home (laughs). You also had a, what they called, an R&R, and I did get to go to Australia on my R&R. And I did waterskiing and did different things while I was there, but it was only week. And when we went through the orientation, because when you got to Australia, before they would turn you loose, you had to go through a form of orientation as to what to expect in Australia and so forth. And they told us, they said, "You all can't drive while you're here." And they said, "There's several reasons: One, they drive on the wrong side of the road, two, you don't have an Australian driver's license, and three, the women wear their skirts so short that you'll never keep your eyes on the road." So, we never did get to drive in Australia. But the taxi drivers, you know, you would want to go somewhere and you would call for a taxi and they would come and you'd say, "Well, I need to go here," and they'd say, "Okay, well, have you seen this part of Sydney?" I'd say, "No." So he'd reach up and flip the meter off and he'd go driving, take you around Sydney and show the different sites and stuff of Sydney. You'd finally get to where you're supposed to be and you'd give him what would have been a reasonable fare to go. Or some of them would say, "Don't worry about it. Spend your money on something," but they were just as friendly as they could be. So, I did get to see parts of Australia. The two things I wish I could do again, is one, I'd like to go back to Vietnam now, and maybe get some closure with some of the

things that I, you know, have had to deal with. And I'd like to go back to Australia. But both of them are, you know, financially out of my reach. I mean, it costs so much to do that stuff, I don't think I ever could. I think it would be fun.

LC: Can you think of any other memorable experiences you had with other medics or other colleagues?

JV: *The one that you called your guardian angel?*

MV: Well, he wasn't a medic. He was the one that picked the guys up and carried them through the door. He carried our 60-caliber machine gun and usually when you shoot a 60-caliber, it walks up, so you had to keep your hand on the barrel and keep it pushed down. Well, he was so big he could take the 60-caliber and put it to his shoulder and hit what he wanted to hit. Every time that I would have to go out to get, you know, somebody would be wounded and I would have to go out to get them, he stayed with me with that 60-caliber. And I asked him one day, I said, "Why are you putting yourself in harm's way?" And he said, "Doc, my job is to take care of you because someday you might have to take care of me." And thank the good Lord I never had to take care of him. I just claimed him as my guardian angel. I thought that was somebody that God sent to look after me because he did and he was just a backwoods country boy. The only things that I carried that might have been considered a weapon: I carried a bayonet, and I carried a machete. And when would come in out of the field, he'd come by and he'd say, "Let me have your knife and your machete." And he would wet rock the edge on them where I could take it on my arm and do like this and shave the hair off my arm. That's how sharp they were. The reason I had the machete is because they issued air splints. If you had you had somebody with a broken arm or whatever, you would put the air splint on and you would blow it up and it would immobilize that part. And the first time I tried to use one, I blew in the port that you were supposed to blow in to inflate it and it came out five other holes because the jungle had put holes and stuff in it; had punctured it. And I thought, well I'm not gonna waste my time carrying these things in my pack when they're not gonna be any good. So, I got a machete, because there was always a tree close by, there were always branches close by, and if had to have a splint, that machete took it down real quick and I chopped up what I need, the length I needed, took dressings, took, you know, ace bandages and stuff, and made straps and just tied the part up and, you know, took care of it. It wasn't trying to put something on that wasn't gonna work anyway. So, he always kept my stuff sharp. The bayonet was simply so I could cut clothes off. You just make you a little niche, and slide it right down the pants leg or whatever to get to the part that was injured.

JV: *What about Jake?*

MV: (laughs) He was our monkey.

JV: *They had a little spider monkey. He didn't like Vietnamese. I've heard this story so much I could tell it. He didn't like the Vietnamese. And they came up on a group of Vietnamese one time, and he just was having a fit. And Michael said, "We gotta stop, we gotta stop." And the captain*

says, "Well, why?" and he says, "Cause we're gonna be attacked." And it's because Jake warned him.

MV: They'd set up an ambush. And we were able to avoid walking in an ambush. He was a friend. He'd go to the NCO club and he'd get down off your shoulder and he'd go pick up somebody's beer. He'd put his bottom feet around it and grab the top of it and tip the thing back and drink the beer and next thing you know it'd drip all over (laughs).

LC: What did you do when you returned home after your service had ended?

MV: Came home (laughs). I worked for my brother in law for a while at Stockyard Farm and Dairy Supply. It sold milky parlors and silo loaders and that type of stuff. I almost got knocked off the top of an eight-foot silo and I thought, "I didn't get through Vietnam to fall off the top of a silo." So, I went to Michigan and went back to school; used my G.I. Bill and went to school. Met my wife, we dated six months and we've been married forty-five years.

LC: Did you keep in contact with anyone from your time in the war?

MV: No. There's a difference, and this is what I'm trying to tell people now, when we went to Vietnam, we were drafted, went in, went through our training, were sent to Vietnam, and you were sent to a unit that you didn't know anybody. Now of course, there were some occasions that they went in on a buddy system where two of them knew each other from high school, wanted to do the same thing, and they weren't drafted but they enlisted to go in and be with the same unit. Most of the time, when you went to Vietnam, you didn't know anybody in the unit, you were just sent there. The ones that are serving now, and this is why I can understand some of the post-traumatic stress that some of these guys are going through, the ones that are there now, they had lived together as a unit for, some of them, two and three years, four years. And that's like family. And when you serve and you have to rely on other people to help protect you, because you don't have eyes in the back of your head, so you've got to have people that will look out for you. And you form a bond, and then one of those people gets shot or they run over an IUD and it blows up the truck or whatever, and they get severely injured or killed. It's like losing a brother or losing a sister. And what a lot of people don't understand, is they're losing family members. Whereas the ones of us that were in Vietnam...

JV: Well, you have it too.

MV: Well not like the guys... I don't have it like some. Some of the ones that came back from Vietnam were addicted to drugs. Because, I mean, you could get drugs in Vietnam just like, you know, like buying candy. I stayed away from it. I never smoked pot, I didn't use any of the drugs. You could buy drugs. They would take marijuana and roll them and dip them in opium. And they called them OJs.

LC: Overall, how would you say that your service influenced your postwar life, and the way that you view war in general?

MV: It helped me, because I did not know what I wanted to do when I graduated from high school, it helped me to make some choices in my life. And I knew I wanted to stay in a profession that I would be able to help, continue to help, my community and my fellow man. So, when I went back to Michigan to decide to go to school, I had a choice of going to work at a country hospital on extended care facility as an orderly or going to work at the hospital up in St Joe and being a dark room and transport orderly for the X-Ray department. And the one at the country hospital was gonna pay me two dollars an hour and the other job was gonna pay me a dollar and eighty-five cents an hour starting pay. And I decided I did not wanna work on extended care facility with the elderly because I never did get a taste for enjoying changing bed pans and stuff of that nature (chuckles). So, I took the job as a dark room tech and went ahead and started taking my basic classes. And I used my G.I. Bill to go to X-Ray school. That's what I have done, I passed my board in '74. And I'm still working at it, at least for a little while longer. So, it did, it helped me decide. And then also over the years after I came back, I went ahead and became an EMT so I could do things here in the states and help people.