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Vietnam Oral History: William McClenahan

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HIST 155, Fall 2016 / Ms. Lydia Scoggins

Student Interviewer's Name: Lydia Scoggins
Interviewee Name: William McClenahan

Time and Location of Interview: 9:00 p.m. at his apartment in Cleveland, Tennessee.

The interview was conducted in one session on November 1, 2016 and lasted approximately fifty minutes. It was conducted in the apartment of William McClenahan in Cleveland, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About William McClenahan:

William McClenahan was born in Society Hills, South Carolina in 1942 and has lived most of his life in Cleveland, Tennessee. He fought in Vietnam as a Staff Sergeant in the United States Marine Corp. He served for a total of eight years in the Marine Corps. This interview covered topics ranging from Kennedy's Presidency to the Vietnam War, and was conducted on November 1, 2016 at his apartment in Cleveland, TN.

Interviewer: Lydia Scoggins (LS)

Interviewee: William McClenahan (WM)

LS: Mr. McClenahan just to start off, how old were you when you joined the military?

WM: Twenty years old.

LS: What made you enlist?

WM: Because there was nothing to do in my hometown that would give me any future working there.

LS: What was the name of your hometown?

WM: Society Hills, South Carolina. There was nothing at all in Society Hills, South Carolina.

LS: What branch did you choose and was there a distinct reason why you chose that particular branch?

WM: I joined the United States Marine Corp because John Wayne was a Marine. (Chuckles)

LS: I'm not familiar with that fact, but it is very interesting! Can you tell me what year you joined the Marine Corps?

WM: 1962.

LS: So you enlisted when President Kennedy was in office. What were your thoughts about him versus Johnson and Nixon?

WM: John Fitzgerald Kennedy was loved by everybody, and Nixon was an extremely good President, but could not man up to what he was supposed to do as President. Johnson micromanaged the war in Vietnam abysmally so, uh, we could not win the war.

LS: Where were you stationed when you first joined?

WM: When I first went in, I went to Paris Island, South Carolina. Then I went to Camp Geiger. Next, I went to Norfolk Virginia. Then from Norfolk Virginia I went to Camp Lejeune. Then from Lejeune I went to Pensacola, Florida. From there back to Lejeune, then to my favorite, Hawaii. I then went from Hawaii to Okinawa and then... Vietnam.

LS: So when you went to Vietnam I am sure there was a big difference from here all the way to there.

WM: A tremendous amount of difference.

LS: Can you describe them to me?

WM: (Sigh) we're jumping a great deal of time but uh, you have to remember at one time Vietnam was considered the gold coast of the orient. All the gold, and ivory, and jewels came from Vietnam... Mainly from the orient of China. Uhh, Cambodia and Laos, but I was used to living in America, hardly any difference from there and living in Hawaii. Great deal of difference in living in Okinawa, a great deal of difference in going to Vietnam into a war time situation into a jungle.

LS: When you were in that jungle during the war, this is probably a silly question sir, but were you ever scared?

WM: I was scared a lot. Uhh, fear breeds caution, and caution saves your life, and I don't know anybody that wasn't afraid at one time or another.

LS: What was your job in the Marine Corps while you were there?

WM: I was a radio telegraph operator, which is a 2533 MOS. In the Marine Corps, your first MOS is a rifleman. You're a Marine. And then after that MOS, then you have the MOS that you are given that's your job; that you are responsible for in the service. Mine was 2500 and 2531, which was a telephone operator and 2533, which was a telegraph operator. I was also a cryptographer. Uhh, I sent cryptic messages back and forth that had to be decrypted.

LS: That sounds like a whole lot of things to do.

WM: If I could go back and serve, I would do it all over again.

LS: Well I speak for so many as I thank you for your service all of those years. Which brings me to my next question, how long were you in Vietnam?

WM: I was there for fourteen months.

LS: What area of Vietnam were you in? Do you remember the exact town?

WM: I remember exactly. I went ashore in Chu Lai, Vietnam in May of 1965. And, uh, the Vietcong were not ready for us to join them in combat and they could not stop our troops. We had a personnel carrier that drove all the way inland, an AmTrac that was loaded with Marines, about eight Marines uh, went all the way inland for almost a mile, and it was probably shot about ten or twenty thousand times, and they had to back all the way back out cause they were covered up with Vietnamese, but they couldn't stop the AmTrac because they didn't have the firepower.

LS: So we overpowered them a great deal?

WM: At first we did. Well you can imagine, we are fighting Vietnamese people in the jungle, and we weren't used to fighting at all. And, an addition to all the armament that we had, we had air craft and helicopters. We never could defeated them because we never could go to Hanoi. They stopped us from going across the demilitarized zones and going into North Vietnam. We could've probably if they had let us go, we could've probably won the war in... I would say... less than six months.

LS: So in your opinion, the war was dragged out?

WM: Oh definitely. It was absolutely dragged out. They stopped the Generals every time we started. We drove em' back, and drove em' back, time and time again. We could've gone in to Hanoi and bombed Hanoi. We could've dug away with the Ho Chi Minh Trail in just a few months with all the firepower we had over there, and the boys could've come home. We could've left a contingent of Marines, and Army over there, and some Navy and Naval vessels over there, and we could've came home in six months' time.

LS: Do you remember much about Ho Chi Minh himself? Like what people would say?

WM: I don't remember anything about him, all I know is what he looked like from a poster.

LS: Did they show you a poster? The Military?

WM: Oh yeah. We knew exactly what the bastard looked like.

LS: Whenever you were there did you have any close friends?

WM: I had five really close friends, and they called us the "Rat Pack"

LS: Why did they call you guys the "Rat Pack?"

WM: Cause we all hung together. We call ourselves the “Firatuspackus”

LS: Did you see combat?

WM: I did. Fire team fights, squad fights. I was in eight different battles. Uh, where there were thousands of people involved, on both sides. And, um, I can’t remember all of them but uh, Operation Starlight was one, uh, Operation Mallard was one of them, Operation Double Eagle, Phase One and Phase Two. Uh, I can’t remember the rest.

LS: Can you describe any of those Operations to me?

WM: (Sigh) I would but I don’t think my heart could take the memory.

LS: That is definitely okay Mr. McClenahan. Did you guys ever hear about the protests going on in the U.S. while you were in Vietnam?

WM: Yes we did. We knew that there was a lot of it. It was a big bone of contingent back home. A lot of people wanted us to come home, a lot of people didn’t want us to be there in the first place, but we were never aware of how bad it was until we came home.

LS: What do you mean when you say “came home?” What happened?

WM: Uh, well it was a pretty sad situation. To come home, and have people (gets very emotional) blatantly either at the airport, or um, on the base, or wherever you were to tell you that they hated you for being over there, and killing people that we didn’t need to be killing, and fighting a fight over there, and um, it was a shame to come home to people that disrespected you for the fact that you were trying to, uh, literally fight for our country and give them back their freedom and, um, ... now some of those people wanted it, and some didn’t, um, the Vietcong were very cruel when it came to the Vietnamese that were for America being there trying to free them from the Communist grip, and the torture that they went through were unimaginable. I’m not going to describe what they did to the villagers to make them join their Vietcong influence, but it was unbelievable, viscous and brutal and horrible.

LS: Did the military ever tell you why you all were having to initially go to Vietnam?

WM: Okay let me back this up and make this clear, I was stationed in Hawaii for a year and then we got word that we were going on a training mission, and they loaded thousands of us on boats. We had been on several training missions in Hawaii and the other islands, and at the time that we left, we were not told that we were going to combat until we got to Okinawa. We had been aboard ship for a month going to Okinawa, and when we got to Okinawa, and then we were addressed by the commanding officers, and they told us where we were going and what it was about. We never knew about it until then, and had no idea we were going into actual combat until ohhh... uh, probably two weeks, maybe three after we boarded ship to Okinawa.

LS: And you had served how long before you received that order?

WM: I think that was May of 64' and I had never seen combat before then, and as far as I know, there were very few people that were with us commanding officers including; that hadn't seen any combat yet either. Like a real war. Um, so it was relatively new to us all. We were a bunch of Marines, and I will admit that we went ashore in a gung-ho fashion, we were ready for whatever, but whatever was a whole lot different than what we had anticipated. The part a while ago in the AmTrac's... that was very interesting. They were not prepared to fight with us with the firepower that we had. And, as a side note to that, the first people that I had saw come back that had lost their lives to the Vietcong, had lost their lives in that mission. And there was several men with machetes and, uh, I remember five or six of them and, uh, that changed my opinion of how I felt about getting involved in hand to hand combat. I never thought about someone coming at me with a machete, let alone shootin' at me, then comin' at me with a machete. And, thank goodness the whole time I was over there, that never happened, but it did change my opinion with people fightin' with what they had to fight with. But, getting back to what you originally asked, none of us knew we were going until Okinawa, and we were told that the spread of communism was coming from Russia through Vietnam and that we were trying to save South Vietnam from that spread and that was the only reason. What I'm trying to say is that everybody in the M.C. thought that was the only reason we were there- to stop the spread, although the United States will disavow it, it spread farther than Vietnam. They took us in helicopters all over the place.

LS: Did you personally agree with the war in Vietnam?

WM: I agreed with that concept to stop communism, and that was one of the biggest things that the Cold War was about and, when the rockets were being taken into Cuba, which was only 90 miles off our coast that was all about communism so, ya know. But, we all agreed on what we were doin' and that was the only reason for goin'. We were just trying to help the people in that country.

LS: Did you come in contact with anyone who wasn't Vietcong or anyone else?

WM: Yes, well kind of. We came in contact with upper people who had trained directly under the Russian advisors and they were dressed differently with a uniform with a red star on them.

LS: What did you think that star was supposed to signify?

WM: It was the symbol of Russia.

LS: Did you lead any missions while you were over there?

WM: No, but I went with the front lines, and radio-back contacts that we were making, and enemy, and troop positions that they were making, and ammunition depots, and then we would call back and radio for firepower for those locations.

LS: Operation Rolling Thunder do you recall the bombings that were termed that?

WM: I think I have a little insight into that. There was a colonel that was in Vietnam trying to help train the Vietcong for what was coming about. He was an advisor from the United States, but he even before we went ashore, there were several of battles and one was called "Rolling Thunder" and another was called Operation "Harvest Moon." The jungle warfare that we were going through did the M14 that we were trained to use did not hold up in that situation jammed up a lot and caused a lot of people to lose their lives. And so that was the reason they went from the M14 to the AR15.

LS: The Christmas Bombings Nixon pushed through can you remember those? They were very controversial at the time.

WM: Nixon's tenure there he did not let up on the bombings toward Christmas there because the, uh, Vietcong and North Vietnam were resupplying their troops, and there was no reason for us to wait until after Christmas, and there was no reason for us to wait until after Christmas to resupply their troops and give them more firepower to fight us with. When we were a little bit ahead at that particular time.

LS: Did you agree with Nixon's bombing that day?

WM: I agreed with anything that would further our endeavor in beating the North Vietnamese.

LS: What were nights like in Vietnam?

WM: Well it depends on where you were. If you were behind the command post line, uh, you were fairly safe, um, but you still weren't safe from mortar attacks or them sittin' up there in the mountains, or in the trees shootin' up your camps, um, that's why we had fire teams out and abroad the command post about as far as... oh, a half a mile trying to keep the command post safe.

LS: Did anything ever wake you up and startle you?

WM: I remember, and having, uh, 105s about 500 yards behind us firing at the South Vietnams, and the rounds whistling over the tops of us while we were trying to sleep (chuckling) and after a while you just got used to it, and you just slept through it.

LS: Did you ever think that this was my last night here, or this is the last night I'm going to be alive?

WM: There were several times when I wondered if this was it. The situations I was in, and that it could happen, but it was never at night. I was twenty-three when I was there. Back then I never even thought about my age.

LS: What did go through your mind while you were there?

WM: Doing the job that I was given. Making sure I was doing the job right, and to the best of my abilities, and when I wasn't doin' a job, makin' sure I was having as much fun as I could while I could.

LS: What could you possibly do over there in a war zone that was fun?

WM: Went swimming. Not every day, we were on the coast. One of our main objectives was to build an air strip in Chu Lai. There was really deep water there, and they could bring the tankers in so they could build an air strip to put the big tanks underground for storing aviation fuel and, um, we were surrounded by water on two sides, uh, we were in a little peninsula when we weren't operating the radios we had to take shifts in foxholes which were sandbag foxholes, and protect the backside of our perimeter from Vietcong.

LS: Did that ever happen?

WM: Yes it did. I mean all they had to do was come across the bay where we were, in sand pans and we had to constantly watch.

LS: Did you ever come in contact with Agent Orange?

WM: Agent Orange was around for a long time, but it never touched my unit while we were there.

LS: Did you have injuries while there?

WM: I had some injuries from shrapnel on my back, but never shot or blown up. Thank the Lord.

LS: Yes, Praise God for that! Did any of your close friends die while in combat with you?

WM: I had a close friend named Ivan, who got shot in the chest and died. He was standin' about... ten feet behind me when it happened and, um, when I was in several operations that we were in, um, one of the first people that they try to get, is people in communications and the officers. I had an antennae shot of one of my radios, and I had a radio literally shot off my back. It was shot nine times. It turned me upside down and I landed in the mud.

LS: I couldn't imagine how that would feel. That is very scary.

WM: That was one of the times that I wondered if I was gonna' come home. Things like that when they happen, they happen really fast, and you don't have time to think about something like that. One minute you're walkin' across a rice patty. and the next you're laying in the patty, so what do you think? You don't think "oh my god this is it!" All I thought was; "Where the crap is my rifle?!" "Why won't my radio operate anymore?!" That's why you're trained so you know what to do without really thinkin' about it.

LS: Why do you think Nixon pulled you out?

WM: Lookin' back on it, there were a lot of people in the United States who disagreed with it... possibly it had to do with what everyone else thought about us being there. Goin' to the peace talks and stuff, and other world leaders and what they thought about us being there, and what we were tryin' to accomplish and, um, yeah, that's what I think.

LS: When you came home after fighting, what was different?

WM: When we got home there were people who literally spat when we got off. I think it made us sad, and we felt bad about being treated that way.

LS: The Vietnam War showed significant veterans with PTSD when they came home. Do you think you could agree with that study? Did it affect you?

WM: Let me tell you something about PTSD. People who have never been in combat, cannot imagine what it's like to be in a situation where there are lots, and lots, of people shooting at you. Bombs blowing up all around you, and you are huddled in a spot by yourself or with someone else, and it just gets to be abysmal. You don't know what to do with yourself, with all that racket and all those explosions goin' on, and your fingers stuck in your eardrums trying to quiet your mind. Um, and, the screaming, um it is unimaginable. Going through things that broke you mentally. Being terrified, not being able to move. So frightened, and so scared that when someone comes up to you they have to pull you around just to make you stand up and walk because you can't move in fear. That particular time it wasn't called PTSD, more like shell shock. You come back and "normal life" isn't something you can reason with.

LS: How was adjusting to civilian life?

WM: Loud noises I struggled with. A car backfiring, would make me jump outta' my skin, but I was okay. There was not very much that I was afraid of when I came back, I'll tell ya that. I was pretty dagum much solidified that I could take care of myself no matter what the situation. I was almost arrogant.

LS: I appreciate you letting me interview you Mr. McClenahan.

WM: Oh I enjoyed walking down memory lane with you Ms. Scoggins. I will answer any further questions you have if you choose to do so.

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Original Interview Questions

- 1. How old were you when you joined?**
- 2. Why did you join?**
- 3. What branch?**
- 4. Why did you choose that branch?**
- 5. What year did you join?**
- 6. How long were you in for?**
- 7. Where were you stationed?**
- 8. Where did you live before joining?**
- 9. What was your job?**
- 10. Who was President when you enlisted?**
- 11. What was life like when you enlisted?**
- 12. Were you deployed?**
- 13. What ways if any did you fight?**
- 14. Do you remember why you had to go there?**
- 15. Did you agree with the war in Vietnam?**
- 16. Did you see combat?**
- 17. Describe what you remember it being like there?**
- 18. Did you ever hear about the protestors?**
- 19. Did you ever meet a protestor?**
- 20. Was there a President change while you were there?**
- 21. Were you ever scared?**
- 22. Did you ever lead certain missions?**
- 23. Did you hear about "Operation Rolling Thunder?"**
- 24. What was life like when you came home?**
- 25. Did you have any PTSD?**
- 26. Do you remember what happened at Kent State?**
- 27. How did you feel about that?**
- 28. Did you have any encounter with Agent Orange?**
- 29. Were you involved with the "Christmas Bombings?"**
- 30. Did you agree with it?**
- 31. Did you visit the memorial?**