Interview with Richard Hertel

VRV-V-D-2015-071

Interview # 1: March 17, 2015

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Hertel: My name is Richard Hertel. I am 69 years old. I am originally from the center of Wisconsin, and I served in Vietnam for ten months. I was a personnel clerk in the 520th Transportation Battalion. In addition to my office job, I was tapped right from the beginning to be the chapel organist because I had a music degree. Of course, there weren't that many people around with music degrees or had any ability on the keyboard, so I did both those jobs.

Interviewer: So you said that you were a personnel clerk in the war, but originally you were offered a position as an officer. How did you end up as a personnel clerk?

Hertel: Well, I was drafted. Because I had my bachelor's degree, I was eligible to go to Officers Candidate School. In order to do that, I had to enlist, so that I had an option. As a draftee you have no choice. You do whatever, so I thought well if I enlisted and went to Officers Candidate School at least might make a little more money. I might have a position of some authority. That's how I went in thinking that. When I got to the induction station at Fort Dix, New Jersey, we were mixed with men coming back from Vietnam. We had time to talk because we had to wait for this and wait for that. A number of them came with the same story, you don't want to be a second lieutenant in Vietnam. We're like, ok what's the problem? Well, enlisted men, especially if they've been in Vietnam for some time, were very knowledgeable and wise about how to preserve your own life and still do your job. They said second lieutenants come in thinking they know everything, and they start ordering people around and make decisions that are frankly extremely dangerous for everyone. In fire fights, they are often shot by their own men. It's called fragging. These guys said you really don't want to put yourself in that situation. Well, we thought about that. I wasn't the only person who was being inducted who was scheduled for Officer Candidate School. When we got into basic training, we asked the sergeant if we could fill out paperwork to drop our option, and the sergeant said no. You're already scheduled for advanced infantry training eight weeks later. You can ask to have the paperwork filled out then. I don't know whether what he told us was the truth or not, but we had no choice. So we had eight weeks of basic training, eight weeks of advanced infantry training. Of course, all of that is targeted towards eventually going to Vietnam. After the second eight weeks, since we weren't going to officer training school, they had to find someplace to put us. They weren't just going to put us in a holding company where we would do odd jobs, so we all get sent to permanent units. What they would do during that period is they would take people out of these permanent units on a levy for Vietnam. So I was sent to an armored unit in Fort Lewis, Washington, and an armored unit has no use for a person who's classified as a foot solider, so they retrained me as a clerk. That may well have saved my life. I don't know for sure. The department of the Army levied me for Vietnam after a few months, and they levied me as a foot soldier, so our administration took my name off of the levy. A couple of months later, the same thing happened, and I was taken off. Eventually the department of the Army caught up with the fact that they had legally changed my MOS, military occupational specialty, to clerk, so my name stayed on the levy. I ended up scheduled to report to be shipped to Vietnam on July 15 of 1969. I did go as a clerk, and it just so happened that they had a position open in a personnel office in Phu Loi, 520th Transportation Battalion. I don't think it was exactly a cushy job. I replaced two and a half people because this was during the period of Vietnamization, so we had fewer men coming from the United States to process. I was trained on three different jobs. One of them was only a part time job. I did those jobs and had Sundays off from the office because I was expected to play organ for the chapel service at our chapel. Then in the afternoon, the chaplain and his assistant and I traveled to Cu Chi, which was maybe about fifteen kilometers away, where one of our companies was located. We did a service for those men in the afternoon, so basically I didn't go to the office on Sunday at all. In a war zone, you work seven days a week, so I worked six days a week as one thing and one day a week as a musician. For me, it was salvation. It was something that I liked doing that I was somewhat good at that. I could do to get me away from the everyday this is the war. Although, traveling from Phu Loi to Cu Chi on Sunday was probably one of the most dangerous things I did in the whole time I was there. Some of the time, the three of us would get in a jeep and go overland, and we had our flak jackets and our helmets and our M16s. Of course the chaplain had a side arm, but the other two of us had M16s. It was just the three of us, so anything could have happened. We were very lucky.

Interviewer: Before I get into the conditions that you experienced while you were in Vietnam, I was wondering when we spoke earlier during your training the importance of the phrase "Charlie" and the objective of the war that you were taught during officer training. If you could, describe that for us please.

Hertel: Well, both in basic and in advanced infantry training, many of the non-commissioned officers who were training us were veterans of Vietnam. Yes, they referred to Vietnamese soldiers as "Charlie". I remember one particular sergeant who was kind of a caricature we've seen on television of the really hard-as-nails drill instructor. He was almost like a Don Rickles character. If it hadn't been so threatening, it would have been funny. It was not funny. There is in any war a certain amount of mental conditioning that they do to the soldiers to prepare them to be able to kill people from the other side. They get demeaned in every way they can think of, so you cannot think of them as a fellow human being. It's insidious, but it's pretty real.

Ledford: Do you have any specific examples of that?

Hertel: When we were shown how to do hand-to-hand combat, we were shown how to very rapidly, very effectively kill someone hand-to-hand. In those instances, obviously we practiced against each other, but it was pretty brutal. It was always, "You got to kill Charlie!" I hope that's enough of an example.

Interviewer: When you said people from the other side in reference to Charlie, did that just include soldiers or did it include civilians, children, women?

Hertel: Well, there was nothing overt that was about killing anyone except military, but I can understand that when your life is in danger or when you perceive danger that you're not going to ask which kind of uniform that person wears. One of the issues in Vietnam was we could not distinguish North Vietnamese from South Vietnamese. Of course, they all looked the same. If they were not wearing military uniforms, you didn't know. We had instances of what were called sapper attacks where someone, Vietcong or someone, infiltrated the base we were on. In one instance, they replaced water that was in these old-fashioned fire extinguishers with kerosene. Because the military has a very strict schedule of checking everything, so in a routine check this was discovered. Fortunately, it was discovered before we had an incoming rocket that would have started everything on fire. Then we would have made it worse by trying to put the fire out. That was a scary thing. We had Vietnamese nationals working on the base who would come in every morning. They did tasks that GIs didn't want to or didn't need to do. We didn't know if any one of them could have been North Vietnamese. We had to live with that. Of course, they were very carefully checked before they were allowed in, but how do you really check? I don't know.

Interviewer: When you were in training, can you explain to us what the overall objective was of the war? Why did they tell you you were going to Vietnam? What was the greater purpose you were serving?

Hertel: We got practically nothing about what the purpose of the war was. It was just basically we were trained to kill and to kill efficiently. I don't remember anything about the politics of the war. In fact, I think the people who were training us specifically avoided any mention of anything that was political because that would put them in jeopardy with their superiors. We got nothing.

Interviewer: When we spoke to you last Monday, you talked about particularly how they convinced you you were trained to kill. Kill first, question later. How did you try to personally resist being conditioned into something?

Hertel: Well, I think the first part of the conditioning was the fact that I was educated. Many of the guys who were in basic training and even advanced infantry training were just out of high school. Their world view was pretty limited. I don't think they were interested in hearing about or talking about any of the political implications. Basically, I kept my mind open. I had never ever wanted to kill anyone, and I wasn't changing that. I think they try to instill hatred of the enemy. I never bought it. The Vietnamese that I had encountered while I was there, only a few, were human beings. Not that I ever got to know them very well, but they had a job to do. They did their job. They treated us with respect. There were women who washed our clothes. All we had to do was make sure we had soap for them. We hardly ever saw or heard from them as long as we paid and we provided the soap, they were good. One of the most distasteful jobs, which of course the GIs didn't want to do, had to do with burning waste. We did not have flush toilets, so for hygiene the best, most efficient way, to get rid of solid waste was to burn it. So the Vietnamese men were responsible every day. That was one of smells of Vietnam that I will never forget because of course I had never smelled burning waste before, not that kind of waste. It may be that the jobs these men had were better than any other jobs they could have gotten. I don't know what they were paid, but they seemed to be willing to do a distasteful job.

Interviewer: Can you explain where you were stationed in relation to Vietnam and what the conditions were like there?

Hertel: Well, Phu Loi was a huge heliport. In fact, it was the largest heliport in the world. It was about 15 kilometers south of Saigon. It wasn't in the most contested area of Vietnam, so you might say relatively safe. The base was centered on the airstrip. It was huge. Mostly helicopters but there were some fixed-wing airplanes. The living quarters were all around the perimeter. Then outside of the living quarters were bunkers. They were manned with guards. I don’t really know. There was some difference, nighttime and daytime, with the number of people. There were always people guarding.

Interviewer: You said it was relatively safer. Did you ever feel like your life was at risk? What was your most stressful day you had while in Vietnam?

Hertel: I think the most stressful day was the day I arrived because the flights in from the United States all landed at night for safety’s sake. This was at a big processing station in Da Nang. Here you are in a country, in a part of the world you’ve never been, and it’s pitch dark. Of course minimal lighting because lighting of course makes you a target. We rushed from here to there and given bunks and basically given a chance to sleep which was good because then next morning when it was light, it’s like oh that’s what this place looks like. That was really stressful because first of all at that point I didn’t even know what my unit was. I didn’t know where I was going. I got my orders while I was there for Phu Loi. Well, I have no idea what Phu Loi is. I think I was at that processing station just for two days and then sent to Phu Loi.

Interviewer: Did you see any combat while in Phu Loi?

Hertel: No, I didn’t see anything firsthand. Although, we did have some incoming rockets. The first month I was there particularly there was a lot of rocket fire at night. Most of it was outgoing, but there was some incoming. That settled down after about a month. Then months later there was a rocket attack in the middle of the night. The next day we heard that someone in the next unit had gotten killed by that rocket. It was a shock because we had not had that kind of thing happening. We felt more vulnerable after that. Well, it could happen to us. The good news was that the target were the aircraft, so the rockets were intended to go over us when we were in our living quarters. The unit that got hit was closer to the airfield then we were.

Interviewer: While you were on base did you witness or experience any drug presence or drug use? You shared a story with us earlier about how you watched a man completely change while on base.

Hertel: I didn’t see any drugs, but I saw the effects. One of the men who worked in our office, when I first met him he was outgoing, friendly, very smart and had a sense of humor, but he had a little trouble with military discipline. He certainly had trouble with war. After awhile, he started changing. At some point, he decided that he wanted to be a nighttime perimeter guard. I guessed that the reason was that it was easy enough not only to have drugs but to smoke pot at night while you were a guard. How safe did that make us feel? Not so much. He actually requested guard duty. Nobody in their right mind requests guard duty, but he did. I didn’t see him very much after that, but when I did see him it was a substantial change. He had lost weight. His complexion had turned from clear, beautiful to really awful. It showed in his eyes. I’m thinking so I thought he smoked pot. By that time, I’m sure it was something mainline. The effects were significant. His personality had totally changed. That really scared me because I couldn’t imagine what kind of life he would have coming back to the United States. It was scary.

Ledford: I'm curious to know who you would say was your enemy in Vietnam? We have had any number of answers. The most obvious answer vets have given us is the Vietcong or the North Vietnamese or the Vietnamese. People would even say the weather was my biggest enemy or the bugs. As a personal experience, who was your enemy in Vietnam and why?

Hertel: Well, I didn't feel threatened a lot. I never labeled anybody as an enemy, but the sappers, whoever was sending rockets into our area, that would have been the enemy to me. Since I had no firsthand connection, I did not hate the Vietnamese people. I had no reason to. I didn't really know them. The one thing that I liked about the Vietnamese people was that most of them spoke French. How does that affect anything?

Interviewer: Going off of that, you had mentioned previously your opinions on the war before you went to Vietnam to after the war. Before you didn't really have an opinion political wise, but after you felt we were fighting for fear and almost a fool's errand. Can you explain that more?

Hertel: Well, of course when I got back in June of 1970 there had been a lot of demonstrations against the war. There was a lot more published about the negative side of the war. By that time, I think Americans were pretty tired of it, and I think there was a political realization that this had been a real mistake. Gradually, as I read and saw news and so forth, including the fact that I had actually been there and saw a certain amount of futility to what we were doing, by that time I had an opinion. Before I went, it was just the government is forcing me to go. I really knew nothing about it except the stuff we were kind of conditioned to think in training. I never really bought it.

Interviewer: Do you think part of what also influenced after that it was somewhat of a fool's errand was that you went in without an opinion and were immediately told that these people were the enemy. Shoot first, think about it later, no compassionate. Then you really saw that they were not an enemy to you. They weren't any threat to you. Do you think that had to do with your opinion after of the stark contrast between before entering and being there?

Hertel: There definitely was a contrast because the Vietnamese that I actually saw were of no threat. Assuming South Vietnamese. There was one Vietnamese woman that worked in the colonel's office. She actually spoke English, and I had only seen her a number of times. From my perception, she was a prize. She was a beautiful, young woman. Of course where else would she work but in the colonel's office.

Interviewer: So she was from Vietnam?

Hertel: Oh yeah, she was Vietnamese.

Ledford: Tell us more about her.

Hertel: Well, that's all I know about her. I saw her a number of times. I never had any direct interaction with her. When I would take paperwork from our office to the colonel's office, it was usually given to another GI. I so admired her because she was beautiful. She had beautiful stature. She seemed to work in that atmosphere completely confidently. There was nothing to hate about that.

Interviewer: Were other civilians hired? Or was it just beautiful young women? I'm just trying to understand the role of going into the war and hearing these people are the enemy. I know she was South Vietnamese but still. It's a beautiful young woman with the colonel. Why was that a relationship?

Hertel: Well, I have no idea what her function was in that office. Maybe window dressing, I don't know. I did observe other Vietnamese who were working doing some of the menial jobs. I never felt threatened by them.

Interviewer: Did you see any other Vietnamese women doing non-menial jobs?

Hertel: No, that one was the only one I saw that was doing office work.

Ledford: What does a clerk do? Describe not just the duties of a clerk, but describe specifically what you did day to day as far as your job. Paint a picture of it.

Hertel: Well, one of the interesting things about our office, it was not air-conditioned. Duh. The only office that I knew of nearby was the colonel's office. The structure brought the roofline to within about three and a half feet of the ground. Then within that, the walls were constructed, so the roofline went way over the side wall. They were all screened, so every morning we all had to take a brush and brush all the dirt off of our desks. We didn't leave any paperwork out on the desk overnight. Everything was put away because if there was any wind at all it would come in. That was much more efficient then allowing any sunlight to hit part of our work area. That was one thing. I took care of officer's records, and I handled what they called d-rots which was rotation overseas. So anyone who was leaving had to have paperwork filled out for them which is what I did. I took care of the officers' records. I did a monthly officer's roster typed up on an electronic typewriter believe it or not. It was something which had to be put on a method of reproduction before we had printers. I had type that up very carefully because making changes was very time consuming. I did that, took care of the records. The enlisted men who handled other enlisted people coming into the unit or leaving handled the records directly. For the officers' records, they all got handed to me by my boss because I was way too lowly to actually process in an officer. The warrant officer was the chief for our section, a very nice man, also a pilot. When we had a new officer, he would hand me the records, and I would store them and do the appropriate things. That was my life. The other job that I replaced I don't even remember what it was any more. It was a few years ago.

Interviewer: Think back for a moment to the young man before Vietnam, Richard Hertel, and to the Richard Hertel after Vietnam. How were these two people different, if at all?

Hertel: Well, I was a lot more mature by the time I came back from Vietnam. I tried to think about how I saw people differently. I think more I saw myself differently. I had a lot more self-confidence and was not afraid of getting into and even difficult situations. I don't think I really changed much about how I felt about other people. I didn't feel particularly threatened in Vietnam as if I had been in battle, but I certainly had a larger world view having not only been in Vietnam but having had R and R in Thailand. That was another amazing experience which just broadened my perception of the world.

Interviewer: If you could share with us your experience with R and R specifically. Where exactly did you go? What was that first day in Thailand like?

Hertel: Well, it was a wonderful experience in many ways. The locations of R and R, rest and relaxation, were hotels that were supported by the government. It was basically treated by most GIs as an opportunity to have sex for seven days. Many of the GIs did exactly that. When GIs went on R and R, the frequently went in pairs because it’s just safer. I went with the man who shared living quarters with me. It wasn’t more than twenty minutes after we got in our room that we had a knock on the door, and there was a lady of the evening making herself available. I tried to explain to her I was married. I was not interested. They had a lot of GIs that were married and definitely interested, so that didn’t necessarily put her off. In the meantime, a friend from the United States who was teaching English in the Peace Corps just outside of Bangkok, we had arranged in advance that she and her boyfriend would meet me. They did show up at the hotel, and they said let’s get out of here. I said yes, let’s get out of here! I really didn’t like the atmosphere. They took me to something that was not supported by the American government, so it was not an American-style hotel. It was fine with me, just stayed there one night. Then, the next day we went by bus the two of us, my friend and her boyfriend joined us, he had a motorcycle, so we went by bus to Ban Sang which was on the gulf. We rented two different beach houses kind of. Diane, my friend, had a college age female student who joined us as well. Diane and her student shared living quarters, and I shared living quarters with her boyfriend just for the few days we were there, but it was wonderful. Fresh fruit, the kind that you can’t get here in United States, and just a very relaxed atmosphere. We went sailing one day, not that I know how to sail, but we hired a sailboat. We went out into the gulf and just walked along the beach and just talked. We had wonderful food. Just getting away from the whole war thing was wonderful. The Thai people, the ones that we met, were so accommodating. Actually the young people were really beautiful. Of course that was a new experience for me too, to know what they were like. The kind of living quarters they lived in and so forth. R and R could be a wonderful experience to broaden your horizons. It didn’t have to be, ‘I’m just spending my week in bed with a prostitute.’ That was my preference, and it worked out quite nicely.

Interviewer: I know you mentioned that you travel a lot now with your partner. Do you think that that passion for traveling and meeting new people came from that R and R experience?

Hertel: It certainly had an effect on it. Not having traveled outside of the United States except with the Army up to that point. Yeah, I would have been a lot more reluctant, and the fact that I spoke no Thai. I spoke no Vietnamese. I just came to the realization that you can get by. You can enjoy what is there and actually in many parts of the world there are people who would love to speak

English with you, even though their English might be limited. The fear was a lot less after that experience.

Interviewer: Did you see any refugee camps in Thailand?

Hertel: No, we were so isolated. The Army was very good at putting you in a place and surrounding you with protection, and the protection was partly for your safety but partly that you did not have any connection with locals.

Ledford: Could you just talk more about that separation? Both in Vietnam and Thailand. Thailand had a lot of refugee camps. You guys were sort of living in this bubble. What was that like?

Hertel: Well like I said, I didn't see any refugee camps in Thailand either because that was not the goal. I didn't know there were refugee camps in Thailand at that point. I'm sure there were. The whole idea was to get away from the whole political issues and just kind of put it aside for a week, so that when you go back to work and back to the war zone you feel refreshed, and I did.

Interviewer: You speak so fondly about this experience in Thailand with the friends that you had. Do you think the other men that chose to just stay in their hotels the whole time shared that similar experience or do you think you had a better outlook because you went out and ventured?

Hertel: Well, many of them were really only interested in the fact that they hadn't had sex for months. Right. Most of them were happy with spending time. The prostitutes were educated. They were knowledgeable. They would tell the GIs, "I want to help protect your money, so if you give me your money I will barter, so that whatever you buy wherever we eat I will make sure you pay the best price." Many of the GIs came back and said, "Well yeah, they made sure at the end of the week that there was nothing left." It was a racket, but you had companionship. You had companionship with someone who spoke English and was beautiful, was sexy. I can't blame anybody for ascribing to that. The U.S. government made it very easy. You could go to Hong Kong. Many of the officers went to Hawaii and met their wives there, but most of the enlisted people could not afford that because that required special permission as well as some money. If you went to Hong Kong or Thailand, there was at least one other in Southeast Asia that you could have gone.

Interviewer: Did you ever feel deprived at all when you were away from your wife or anything?

Hertel: Well, I missed my family immensely. My daughter was born one week before I left for Vietnam. I was scheduled to report on July 15th, and that was my wife's due date, so the Red Cross got me an extension on my leave. It turned out that my daughter was actually born on her due date, on July 15th, and I was able to be there which was wonderful. Then I missed basically the whole first year of my daughter's life which was excruciating. There were no cell phones. We had no access to phones of any kind. No email, so the only communication that I got with my family was by a letter.

Kranich: When you think back to the prostitution and the role it played in the war, can you describe how it worked in the Vietnam War? You did describe it, but when you look back and reflect on it, do you have thoughts about it?

Ledford: I'd just like to include within that question, I'm just curious. I've been in that situation. I was in Cambodia actually when a woman came up to the door for the same purpose. I'm just curious how did she communicate to you what the deal was? How did she communicate that to you? How old was she? What do you remember about her? Then looking back now at the sex trade back there, as Kimberlie said, what's it like looking back at all that?

Hertel: Well, I did know that prostitution was legal in Thailand. I had heard plenty of stories of guys who came back from R and R in different places and that the story was pretty much the same for most of them. Any of them that were happy to talk about it. I don't remember at all what the woman said, but she was young. She was beautiful, and the way she was dressed spoke volumes. I don't know she had to say much, and my roommate pretty much took over and said well yeah come on in! I pretty much said well no, I'm leaving. That's what happened.

Kranich: So these women, this was there war time job? Did you think about the women? Did you think about their lives? Do you think about them now?

Hertel: Well I don't think that their lives as prostitutes were predicated on the war. As I said prostitution was legal in Thailand, so any American or other foreign visitor could easily have found somebody, and probably Thai men would have found that attractive as well.

Ledford: Could you describe your leaving Vietnam? You had such a wonderful eye-opening experience there with the R and R that was included with your experience in. You had grown more confident. You had changed as a human being. Can you just talk about your leaving of all of that? Then, my understanding is there was sort of a light bulb moment on the flight home regarding to your survival. What did you come home to? What did you do when you arrived?

Hertel: Well, you expressed it well. It was sort of a light bulb experience. Of course, any GI who gets close to the date where they're going to leave, they're called short at that point. You look forward to it, yet you're a little apprehensive because you think if something bad is going to happen it's going to happen the last day before I leave. But nothing happened. I managed to get all the paperwork done because I was the one who filled out the paperwork for people leaving. It's like ok I can handle this. They flew GIs not first class but in standard airlines, big 747s and so forth. Just getting on that plane was oh it's almost like being back home. That was wonderful just that much. There was still that kind of uneasy feeling until we actually took off and got out of Vietnamese air space. Then it was a big sigh of relief. It's like ok I'm going to be fine. I actually have survived, and I'm going home. At that point, the ah-ha moment was alright so what am I going to do with this? My life has been preserved. I have almost no physical complaints. I am much more solid emotionally than many guys who left Vietnam. I've been spared so much. Do I now have a responsibility to do something with my life because it's been kind of given back to me? I really did feel that. I felt like ok God saved my life. I have a purpose, and my already stated purpose before I got that far was graduate school. I had applied to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee while I was still in Vietnam, and had been accepted. I had that to look forward to. It was wonderful to just feel that freedom. My responsibility to the U.S. government was completed. My wife and my young daughter were waiting for me at home and of course the rest of my family. It was a wonderful feeling but yet a feeling of responsibility. Now I have to do something with my life.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you took a bit of a detour before you ended up back with your wife and daughter. What was that experience?

Hertel: Well, I was processed out of the Army in California, and my favorite aunt, with whom I had done a lot of exchange of letters, was near Portland. She was there visiting some other of our relatives that I had not met. When I wrote to her and said I was coming back at such and such a date, she said, "Well, you'll be so close. You're welcome to come and join us." Those family members owned a strawberry farm near Portland. Just to have the freedom to do something, that I could choose, was wonderful. When you process out of the military, they give you enough money to get you back to your home of record. I was able to schedule myself to go up to Portland and stay with them maybe three days or something like that. Then I flew home. My wife never forgave me for not coming home directly as quickly as I could. I understood how she felt, but it was an opportunity for me to be free and to visit other family that I knew I would never see again, and I didn't. Then I got to visit with my aunt. Again, she was the one who wrote to me most faithfully while I was in Vietnam and even after that. I mean you make your decisions, and you pay the price.

Interviewer: You mentioned that your wife didn't write you for three months after you used a term that you didn't think was going to offend her as much as it did.

Hertel: Yeah, I don't even realize how it slipped out, but one of the pejorative terms that people used, especially GIs, used for Vietnamese was 'gooks'. I let that slip in one of my letters probably like in January or something like that. My wife did not write to me for three months afterwards. I had no idea why she wasn't writing. I kept writing to her. That was during the time that I was arranging that R and R in Thailand, so I just kept going. I don't even remember when I finally found out that was the reason, but I thought that was particularly unfeeling. It would have been a lot better if she had just written me a letter and ripped me up for doing that. At least I would have understood why, but silence was her method.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel not hearing from your wife who had just had a new born baby?

Hertel: Well, it was pretty tough. I really wanted to know what was going on with my daughter's life. I mean she was what six or seven months old then. At that age, there's something new every day. I really felt like I was missing it.

Interviewer: Do you identify yourself as a Vietnam veteran?

Hertel: Yes.

Interviewer: Like very consciously?

Hertel: Well, I guess so. I've joined the VFW, Veterans of the Foreign Wars, the local chapter in Savoy.

Interviewer: Have you talked about your experience with the war until recently?

Hertel: Occasionally. Most people are not too interested in hearing about it. If I had been in combat, people might have been more interested, but since I wasn't it's like ok you did an office job.

Interviewer: Can you talk about the evolution of your marriage after the war? You came out as a gay man, correct, eventually. You've been married twice. Can you talk about the evolution of your personal life after the war? Did your experience in the war influence that at all?

Hertel: When I got back, I was really focused on going on to the next stage in my life, and that was graduate school. During my first year in graduate school in Milwaukee, my son was born. After I finished the degree, I had done some applying for college teaching jobs with very little luck because with a master's degree it's kind of a long shot. I worked for that year doing some teaching, teaching piano, teaching voice. My wife worked as a nurse's aide. We just kind of kept things together the best we could. I had studied voice with a man at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who had gotten his doctorate in voice at the U of I. I had heard about the teacher he had over and over. He was a wonderful teacher. I thought he probably is getting close to retirement. If I'm going to do this, I need to go down to Illinois and work on my doctorate, so I applied. I was accepted. In 1973, we moved as a family to Champaign-Urbana. Since I was out of state I worked for a semester, so I could start in the spring semester as a resident, which I did. I got very very heavily involved in working on my degree. I got a soloist job at a local church. It just happened that the director of that church choir was a gay man. He was out pretty much. He was one of the first people I knew who was openly gay and was a wonderful, intelligent, musical person. I thought you know maybe that's not so bad. He had a long-term relationship with another man. Of course, gay marriage was certainly not possible back then. That influenced me some. I had had some evidence earlier on that I leaned that direction. I had all my life done what the church, my family and society had told me to do which is get married and have children. Well, I had done that, and it clearly was not me. It took a while to accept that, but when I finally did I felt my responsibility was to be honest with my wife and say, "Look this is the way it is now. We need to get divorced. I will want to continue to have a relationship with my children, but you have to do what you need to do." After our separation, I did meet a man with whom I've had a relationship with for 35, 37 years. We went through the civil union in 2011 when that became legal. Then in 2014 we were married. It turned out because of the way the law worked in Illinois, they back dated our marriage license to 2011. We've officially been married since 2011. Although our marriage ceremony, not the civil union, happened last June. Yes, I've had a long-term relationship with someone that I expect to live with the rest of my life.

Interviewer: Did that light bulb moment that you had on that plane have anything to do with you coming out and being open to that?

Hertel: I think it did. It was an early point at which I started to feel more confident with who I really was. Having served in Vietnam and feeling that freedom in a sense when I was on the plane on the way back to the United States, feeling that I had fulfilled some responsibility that I could be more confident with what I felt. That was just the beginning of opening that door. I still was married and had one child and not too long after that a second child. I felt responsibility to them, but when I could get to the point that I could admit that I was gay I felt like I had a responsibility to myself but also a responsibility to my wife and family to be totally honest with them. I had seen other men live their whole lives just as kind of two people, really always covering up their real selves and pretending to be straight. The more I thought about that the less I wanted that.

Interviewer: Is that why you decided to share your story because you felt that responsibility?

Hertel: Yeah, I think that that's a part of it. Too many people for too long have hidden what they really feel. We're very fortunate in this day and age that, at least in this area, I don't typically have to be afraid that somebody is going to kill me if they think I'm gay. There are still places even in the United States where that's a possibility.

Interviewer: How has talking about your experience been for you?

Hertel: Well, I've pretty much come to terms with it, so sharing it with someone else is not so hard anymore.

Interviewer: Is that you coming out or Vietnam?

Hertel: Both.

Interviewer: Could you explain a little further?

Hertel: Well, just the fact that you're doing this project that asks veterans about their experience, how they felt afterwards. It gives me a sense that the service in Vietnam is valued more than it used to be. Second World War veterans have gotten a lot of press in the last ten years because they're all dying off. There was very little question about the need for that war. With Vietnam, it has been kind of swept under the rug because a lot of people didn't think we should be there. There was so much destruction, not only of the land but of people, including GIs of course.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel that people undermined that so much when you went there and risked your life and lived through all of that heat, the bugs, everything?

Hertel: Well, I thought that I couldn’t change the political situation. That I disagreed what was going on once I had some understanding of it, but I have never felt bitter about having to serve. Partly because it was a catalyst for a lot of change in me, positive change. It might have happened even without it, but I don’t know.

Interviewer: Do you almost look back at the war and you being drafted as positive thing in your life? It’s been a positive element?

Hertel: I think in the end it is. I would not have said that back then.

Ledford: Can you just rephrase that in a complete sentence?

Hertel: I didn’t feel as though my being drafted and my service in Vietnam was a positive thing back in that day, but looking back I feel that it caused a certain amount of growth in me that has been very important for the future, anything after Vietnam. I wasn’t grateful for the way it got done, but in the end it was a positive experience in my life.

Interviewer: When you look back at your time in Vietnam, do you have any regrets or anything that you wish would have gone differently?

Hertel: I wish that I had been able to keep contact with some of the guys that I served with, but at the point that I got out of the military I was totally focused on my family and going to school. I really didn't want to look back at that point. Now I'm sad that I didn't. I've done some at least half-hearted efforts to find some of the guys. Some of them I actually remember their full names, and I may be able to contact at least one of them in the near future.

Interviewer: Do you think that was a coping mechanism from getting back to just getting back to work since you are into education and stuff like that? Do you think that was your way of getting over the things that you saw and your experience in the war?

Hertel: Yes, I think that getting deeply involved in my degree work, and re-establishing my relationship with my wife and getting to know my daughter was a way of getting back to normal for me. It was very important. Although, right now I wished that I had connected with some of the people.

Interviewer: Would you go back if you had the chance to Vietnam?

Hertel: I would love to go back as a tourist. Yes. I have looked at different trips, and they've all been too expensive for what I could do right now. I also wanted to be able to take my partner there and share that experience with him. It just hasn't been able to happen right now, but I would definitely. It's a beautiful country and beautiful people.

Ledford: I'm curious if you have talked much with your husband about your Vietnam experience. Is it maybe one of the things that's off limits to talk about? I just wonder if you shared much with him about it. If so, why? If not, why not?

Hertel: Yes, my partner and I have talked about it some. He had some questions as to how this and how that happened and so forth. I particularly told him about some of the people that I served with that were particularly close. One of the things about a war zone when you work with the same people every day, you become close. You learn about their families. You learn about their history and so forth. Yes, I have shared that. It has not been a problem.

Ledford: You mentioned earlier, when we were talking about when you realized, you met the choir director, an openly gay man who was someone you held in high esteem. Then you said that there had been indications previously that you thought that you might be gay or you realized you were gay. Did you realize when you were in the Army that you were gay? If so, what was that like? You said the indications, what were you talking about? If you feel comfortable sharing with us, I'd be very interested in those.

Hertel: While I was in the military, I was still totally closeted. I had not come to the point where I would have been able to admit it to myself, so there's no way I could have come out to anyone else. Also, in a war zone it is really dangerous to make any kind of attempt at a relationship with someone when everyone you know has a weapon. It’s extremely dangerous because if your attempts are rejected, it could mean you’d be killed. I was not at all tempted. Although, I did realize after that experience of Vietnam that I was very comfortable being surrounded only by men. The only female that I ever saw was the woman who worked in the colonel’s office.

Ledford: Could you just say that phrase again?

Hertel: The only female that I saw that represented a female was the woman who worked in the colonel’s office.

Ledford: This is a beautiful story you’re telling about everybody had a weapon. You couldn’t reach out even if you wanted to. All that was great. Could you just tell Vee that story from the beginning?

Hertel: While I was in the military, and especially in Vietnam, I never would have reached out to another guy partly because I was still not convinced that I was anything but straight at that point, but it was also dangerous because everybody had a weapon. If you were to reach out to someone and they were not very happy about it, you could easily be killed. There was no incentive. I didn’t really know my own feelings at that point. My definition of myself was a married man with a child, and I owned that. It was only later when I survived Vietnam where I started allowing myself to think of any other possibilities. When I was returning, I realized that the whole ten months I was in Vietnam, I hardly saw a woman. The woman that did my clothes, I mean I never really saw her once I had given her her money. The woman who worked in the colonel's office I would see once a month maybe, but I was among men all the time. That felt perfectly natural to me. It got me to thinking. The fact that when I was on R and R, I was definitely not interested in the prostitute. That could have been fidelity. That could have been something very different. So yes, it was quite a few years later when I was in graduate school here at the U of I that I finally had a role model of a gay man who was a very nice person, very smart, very good musician, who was in a position of responsibility in a church. I felt at that point that that could be me, so I started being more open to the thought. It just took a long time.

Interviewer: When you recall the story of how it was dangerous to even make, even if you were interested in men at the time, the way you phrase it is that you were scared of the other men because they had weapons, but you were also scared because of the expectations you had at home to be a family man, to live by the church, to live by society, do you think part of the reason you didn't make close bonds was you were almost afraid to get too close knowing what it might mean?

Hertel: Well, yes I think that my self-image was still a straight man married with a child. There certainly was some danger to form too close a relationship with another GI. Heterosexual men bond, but they do it in a different way. There are restrictions about touching, so when I was in Vietnam I still felt those restrictions. It took a long time for me to change before I could go beyond that description of myself.

Ledford: You were trained to kill and you went over there and you typed. Were you ever trained as a typist by the military?

Hertel: Yes, actually when I finished advanced infantry training I was sent to a permanent unit, and that unit was an armored unit. They had no use for a foot solider, so they retrained me. I went to the Army typing and administration course at Fort Lewis, Washington. We typed every day, and we learned the Army way of doing everything. There's the right way, the wrong way, and the Army way. That was so true because of course their filing methods were all different. That's how my specialty got changed from foot soldier to clerk. That's why eventually when I did get to Vietnam, I was occupied as a clerk.

Ledford: So you were trained as a typist and you did it, but you were also trained as a killer. Do you think you could have killed anyone over there? Have you ever thought about that?

Hertel: I think that if my life had been threatened I could have killed someone, and that scares the hell out of me.

Interviewer: Did you think that while you were in Vietnam? Was that a reoccurring thought in your mind or was it only when something came up like when the rocket hit?

Hertel: I didn't think about it very much, but yes there were times when there was a perceived threat. When I was promoted to specialist five, I was in rotation with other specialist fives who did charge of quarters which was an overnight guard of the quarters. The whole night you're there pretty much in the dark checking all of the buildings and so forth. That person also wakes people up in the morning. That is a pretty lonely job because everybody else is sleeping and you're walking around in the dark. That's a point at which you have your weapon with you and you pretty much think if somebody all of sudden appeared in the dark and threatened you, you probably would shoot.

Interviewer: Looking back, was your perception of what war was going to be like and what Vietnam was going to be like similar to what you experienced when you got there or was it a drastic difference?

Hertel: Well, I really had very little idea of what it would be like. The kinds of things that we saw on the news were in the jungle. I never was fighting in the jungle. I really had little to give me an expectation.