

Interview with Don Stevens

Stephanie Gard- *What was your first memory of the Vietnam Conflict?*

Don Stevens- My very first memory would have been about 1965 when I attended college and the NAACP was starting a lot of racial tension in the 60's plus the Vietnam Conflict was starting to rise in the news media every day.

Stephanie Gard- *How old were you then?*

Don Stevens- I was 18 then and I turned 25 in Vietnam, so there was about a seven year period it was top and foremost in a lot of people's minds.

Stephanie Gard- *What were you doing there?*

Don Stevens- Ok, I was drafted into the US Army in 1968, and went through Officer Candidate School, I went through Airborne Training, I went through Green Beret Training and then I went to Vietnam. I spent the year of 1971 in Vietnam as an Infantry Platoon Leader, a 2nd Lieutenant.

Stephanie Gard- *What were your overall emotions toward the Vietnam Conflict?*

Don Stevens- It's been very confusing, the emotions, and I've developed several more or less in the last few years. But at the time the very troubling emotion, because we were sent overseas to do a job and yet the country behind us didn't seem to be supportive of us and that gets very difficult to go 10,000 miles from home to do something your country has asked you to do and then get letters from home saying people are burning the flag, burning their draft cards, and it was very emotional. And, uh yet those of us went while we were there we did a very good job and did what we were told.

Stephanie Gard- *Do you remember any protests or rallies?*

Don Stevens- Yes, in the '60's I was attending Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and there was almost daily, walking to class, there were groups of what we called beatniks back then, with the starting of the long hair from the Beatles, and they wore blue jeans and coats with holes in them and raggedy ties and long hair, and they would want you to sign protests and you couldn't hardly go to class without being accosted to sign something almost daily.

Stephanie Gard- *Humph.*

Don Stevens- Cough.

Stephanie Gard- *What did people in Marshall do to help the men and women in Vietnam?*

Don Stevens- There was several programs, and I'm sure the Marshall people as well as all over the country, we used to receive what they call Sundry packs and in that would be Chicklet chewing gum, toilet paper shaving cream, maybe a bar of soap, a combination of things and uh, people would give \$2 and someone would put this package together and in that package would be the name of the family that donated the money. And I'm sure that the people of Clark County supported that program just as much as anywhere.

Stephanie Gard- *Was there much communication between Marshall and the men and women over the seas?*

Don Stevens- At least through the families there was a lot, but I don't know about anywhere else. You have to remember that the war lasted 10 years, and most people served one year, so you were over there and then you were home, it sort of became a news media thing and in the houses everyday you turn the TV on and that was all you saw. There wasn't outside of family communication, I doubt very little.

Stephanie Gard- *What type of music or shows were popular at the time?*

Don Stevens- Well, songs I remember the two main songs of 1971 that I remember were well uh, "I Never Promised you a Rose Garden" by Lynn Anderson, and uh and then from the rock and roll side was Country Joe and the Fish sang a song "Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog". Those were the two main songs I remember, now there were a lot of them, but Country Joe and the Fish, Country Joe and the Fish was not the one that sang "Jeremiah" that was, uh help me out girls.

Christy Rentschler- **Oh, I don't know.**

Don Stevens- Uh, anyway, Country Joe and the Fish did the song "1-2-3-4 What are we fighting for? Don't know and don't give a damn, next stop is Vietnam, and 5." Have you heard that one, ok well that was one of the main ones that was going on at that time period.

Stephanie Gard- *Ok.*

Don Stevens- The Beatles started then and really things changed from '64-'68.

Stephanie Gard- *Was it an important topic for Marshall to discuss, or was the problem avoided?*

Don Stevens- My personal opinion is that it was avoided by as many people as possible. Not because they didn't want to talk about it but that they didn't know what to say about it. Like I said earlier if someone in your family went they were there one year and they came home. And then it's like out of sight, out of mind, and the daily TV programs just became a way of life. We had young men and women dying in Vietnam and nobody seemed to care too much.

Stephanie Gard- *How were the soldiers welcomed when they came home?*

Don Stevens- Wasn't any to be honest. I went from sleeping on a jungle floor to 3 days later sleeping in my house, and if you don't think that ain't a shock then. The US government, for 1 year I was gone so for 1 year you don't know what's happening, so I guess, imagine yourself if you laid out one year of high school, you'd miss a lot and then come back to it and expect everything to be the same it's not. So, I think the government owed us an indoctrination to say well here are the new songs, here are the new styles, here is what's going on in the country. I said I went from a jungle floor to sleeping in my own bed in 3 days and that's quite a shock.

Stephanie Gard- *How did Marshall react when Vietnam ended?*

Don Stevens- That would be a tough question to answer. I don't know. I'm sure everyone was thankful, without a doubt that something as controversial as Vietnam was over. And many, many people were very thankful and I was thankful simply because well, there was young men and women dying everyday and nobody seemed to be supporting them and my feeling was either get in there and kick butt and do it right or come home, and I think we should have come home long before we did, or made that decision.

Stephanie Gard- *Were there any special functions held in Vietnam for entertainment for the soldiers?*

Don Stevens- Yeah there was USO shows, entertainers would come. Now very few people got to see them, like the Bob Hope show which is famous from all the wars at least WWII on would be over there once or twice a year, but like only one person from your unit would get elected to go hear it. So, very few of us got to see them, but there was lots of oh Filipino bands, Korean bands, like that couldn't speak English but tried to sing English songs and different yeah.

Stephanie Gard- *Do you have anything else you'd like to share or that you'd like us to know about Vietnam?*

Don Stevens- Well, I think a lot of it is children, well I shouldn't say children, young men and women your age need to realize that the average age of people killed in Vietnam was 18-18 1/2 years old and I don't know how old you guys are but you look like about 16. The young men and women just 1 1/2 years from your age doing what I had to do, and I was one of the older ones over there. The average age was 18-19. I had a young man that carried a machine gun for me that was 6'3"; he wasn't even done growing. He's now 6'6", so he wasn't even fully a grown man yet. And he was when the country sends you off to war it's the young that go, it's the young that die. The other thing I would tell you is that war is not pretty and war is bad. You cannot imagine and there is no way to tell it, it is bad and everyone needs to realize that. And when this country commits to a war, it needs to commit to win that war and do it right. Now I don't know what the history books are going to tell you, but we lost for the first time in the history of this country, we

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came in 2nd place and 2nd place in war is not good. That is my personal opinion, I would like to see what they are going to teach in the schools, because no matter what they tell you we lost. It is no longer a free country over there, it is under Communism so we lost.

Stephanie Gard- *I was going to ask you about your book. What was it about?*

Don Stevens- Yes, I wrote a book called *Bait* in 1987 which was basically the day-to-day living from the day I got there in 1971 until I came home. It describes believe it or not, a lot of humor as well as the bad, it is quite a uh for me to write it I got tired of in the late 70's of watching TV at night and it seemed like every Vietnam veteran was a drunk, a drug addict, or a murderer. And I realized that myself and many I knew were very normal individuals, came back home, got married, settled down, had children and nobody would know they was ever in Vietnam. So that prompted me to write about some of the young men I served with and I'm very glad that I did it. I have a reunion every 5 years, and this reunion is coming up this summer so if you girls want to meet some, they should have a copy of the book here at the library I think or used to. If not I'll get you one, if you want it

Stephanie Gard- *OK.*