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Morehead, Ky 26045

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- Q. John Horgan
A. Donnie Castle

Q. Donnie, you graduated from Morehead in 1974?

A. August, 1974. I was a late graduate. I went into the service, right out of high school. I was eighteen years old and I spent three years including the tour in Vietnam. When I came out I worked for six or seven years before I came to college. I came back in 1971 and went straight through, summers and everything. I graduated in three years.

Q. What was your major?

A. Health, P.H.S. ed. and I had a minor in recreation.

Q. What are you doing now?

A. I'm supervisor for the State of Kentucky, Department for Environmental Protection, Division of Water. We monitor all agricultural, Industrial and municipal waste water discharges in fifteen counties. We are also responsible for drinking water supplies, water quality.

Q. Is that a state agency?

A. yes.

Q. Did you get that job out of college?

A. I got that job right out of college. I graduated in 1974 and I went to Eastern, spent one semester there doing graduate work, then I came back to Morehead to finish my graduate work.

Q. Did you get your Masters here then?

A. Yes. I didn't get that until 1976, but in May of 1975 I started in this job.

Q. In talking to you about Vietnam, you're probably saying what's this guy after. I think first of all, I'm trying to get together an oral history collection of the memoirs of the men who served in Vietnam that we can have in the library as a historical record. Oral history is something that has come in vogue, so to speak among historians over the past twenty years. Because less and less people are writing

down what they think or what happened to them, and the only way you can capture their memories is to put it down on tape. Used to be in the old days, I guess during the Civil War, the vet might have kept a Diary or wrote letters home to his mom or his sweetheart, but I don't think they're writing this way anymore and, now instead of writing a letter we get on the telephone. So, we find that the oral history is the only way to do this. I got a grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission to engage in this work. One of the other outcomes of it is I've come to appreciate a great deal what the veterans of the war went through. I think their story should be told. I think also that the University should recognize these men and I'm hoping in the long run that as I get this list of people together who graduated from the university, that we can in the future perhaps in a year or so be able to see something up there in the way of commeration of these men. So, I've found that the guys I've been talking to are very appreciative of that, so I'm working hard to get this record together.

Q. Let's go back then to your going to Vietnam. What year did you go into the service?

A. 1962, just a few months after I graduated from high school. I did a tour in Taiwain where I was, I thought, I was eighteen years old and had never been off the block in Ashland and I was just like a civilian over there. We had a number of people in our outfit there and I worked in a message center--it was eight hours a day, six days straight, two off, six days, four off. It was just like a paradise to me over there. I thought the army was the greatest thing that ever came along and I thought all the tours of duty were just like over in Taiwain. I was like a civilian. I ate in resturants and I lived in a hotel and worked just eight hours a day with no harassment or extra duty or anything to speak of. So, I came back and went to Texas and I only had five and a half months to go and I was just kind of riding my time out in Texas. The third day I was in Texas, I was on 69 kp duty and I worked on a motor-pool evertday. We had to keep these big rigs that had radio equipment and communication equipment on them and all we ever did was keep that stuff in preparation for some function of duty where we might be called of a sudden to strike force and go someplace and set up a communication system. And I never had any idea we'd ever be called on to do that.

Q. This was Texas in what year?

A. I came back from Taiwain and spent about six or seven months in Texas, it was July of 1965.

Q. So, you'd already been in the army three years?

A. Two and a half. About all we did down there was to stand by our vehicles and every once in a while this guy'd come over the loud

speaker and he'd say stuff like, check your front axel and you'd look at your axel and put this check mark on there and that's about all we did. I didn't like Texas very much, I was still getting over Taiwain. So, one day they called us all together and said we're going someplace but we can't tell you where.

Q. What kind of outfit were you with?

A. 54th signal communications.

Q. And your mos was?

A. Teletype operator on the big rigs, a mobile unit. So, the CO got us all together and said we have orders to move out. We're going someplace and we can't tell you where it's at for security reasons. So, if you've got cars you've got one week to get somebody to come pick them up or you can leave it in the motor-pool for thirty days. We're leaving in ten days, so you can leave your vehicle in the post motor-pool and have somebody pick it up within thirty days. I'd just bought this car about two months before, it was a volkswagon, and couldn't sell it because all the other outfits were leaving too, going to Vietnam. So, I tried to sell it for a few days and couldn't. I finally pulled it into a used car lot and said what would you give me for this and he said you're going to Vietnam and I said I think so. I'd given \$800 hundred dollars for the car two months before and fixed it up a little bit, and the guy offered me \$300 hundred for it. I said, no, I'll have to have \$400 and he said \$350, we finally settled on \$375. Anyway, I sold my car just like that, I lost about 400 bucks on it in two months. So, the CO told us he couldn't tell us where we were going but could give us a hint, It was across a lot of water. So, everybody knew where we were headed.

Q, You had to guess where you were going?

A. Right, they wouldn't tell us for security reasons.

Q. Did you kind of suspect where you were going?

A. Sure, everybody knew where we were headed. For the next week all we did was pack our rigs onto flat cars at the railroad and we left out and traveled by rail to Oakland and then pulled everything onto boats. Took a, if I'm not mistaken, a twenty-six day boat ride on the U.S.S. Mitchell, 2,000 troops, to get to Vietnam. It took eight days to get to Hawaii. They turned us loose for shore leave in Hawaii. Nobody'd had a beer in eight days or had any fun really, the boat was real boring I remember we were sitting there trying to think of things to do, from the guys you've talked to you probably know that an army guy can make a little fun out of about anything. There were worse situations, I'd been seasick for about six days but I remember one of our ways of passing the time, there's absolutely no recreation on a boat, we had two movies and they showed them every night--the same movies.

One of them was 'A Funny Thing Happened on The Way to The Forum' and the other was 'The Great Escape' by Steve McQueen. We got to know those movies by hears. I think when we stopped in Okinawa just a few days from Vietnam we traded movies, I don't remember what they were, by that time I was too worked up about going in country. One of the things we did on the boat for past time, they had a latrene--it had one continuous trough with commode seats on top of it, that had water coming from one end to the other. The first couple of days you had to learn not to set down on the end where the water went down because there was a blank wall and every time the boat lifted, water shot about four feet into the air. We would set ther the first couple of days and watch people set on that end, a little bit of entertainment there. So, you can tell there wasn't much to do on that boat.

Q. When did you get to Vietnam?

A. I arrived in Vietnam after a twenty-six day boat trip, we pulled into Quinhan in July, 1965.

Q. You must have been one of the very early offensives in July of 1965.

A. Well it just started, the big buildup came along. We pulled into Quinhan the same day the first car did, they were, I don't know how many boats there were of those people. Somebody tole me it was 20,000. The night before they gathered us all together, the CO said how many people do we have that are combat veterans? There were one or two and a few Korean people. He said, 'well we're going into Quinhon and we're going to convoy, it was something like 300 miles, to Nhatrang where we were supposed to be going. He said, every many here will be a combat veteran by the time we get there.

Q. You're the outfit with all the trucks right? Would you carry men or just supplies, what were you going to be doing?

A. We had everything we needed to set up a communication sustem and we were going to convoy those trucks along with some garb, you know, to Nahtrang and set up a communication system. We had everything we needed on the back of those trucks to set up a complete message center.

Q. So what was your feelings as you came in under this situation, something you'd never forseen. You're in a war.

A. Oh yes. I thought I was going to be out drinking a beer with the guys. Because in July I had only five months to go and one guy said, "I've only got sixty days left. They said everybody that's got thirty days left from today goes. It was for replacement purposes. They couldn't let anybody that had less than four or five months go because most of the people back then were UF's and most of them just had a few months to go. I was RA but a lot of them were UF's, just on two year hitches and it would have been probably a third of our outfit. So, once we got going, you took the boat trip and you only spent a week or two in Vietnam if you just had thirty or forty days left and then you came back.

- Q. They shipped you all the way back?
- A. Right, but I had five months. That was the first question that came up, who has to go and who gets to stay. If you had less than thirty days you got to stay.
- Q. What were your first impressions of Vietnam and the land? What did the country seem like to you?
- A. I was lucky I guess, I had been to Taiwain and had some feeling of seeing another country, because I'd never been anyplace until I joined the army and went to places like Taiwain. If course we stopped in Hawaii and Okinawa at different times during all this travel and stuff. But Vietnam was so much poorer than Taiwain. Tawain was kind of classy compared to Vietnam. It had this feeling of what's going to happen here. I really didn't know what it was all about.
- Q. That's what I was going to ask you, did you know why you were there?
- A. Not really, I'm kind of a slow learner I guess.
- Q. Well, it was so early I suppose. Vietnam was not really hitting the consciousness of the Americans at that time.
- A. No. You just didn't hear anything about it what so ever. I think the first American killed was November of 1966 wasn't it?
- Q. Yes. Well there were some before that but I guess it would be the official death.
- A. It was starting to heat up just a little in 1965, and there wasn't any really big fear or anything, but there was just this little knawing at you , knowing you were going into the unknown and wondering if it would explode on you.
- Q. I suppose not really being prepared for what might happen or apprehensive about what might happen. Is that what you mean?
- A. Yes. Just an innocence as far as I personally am concerned. Just a little strange feeling, not really scared or anything, just not knowing. Just going into something kind of blinded.
- Q. Did the rest of the guys seem to feel the same way?
- A. Yes, most of them. When we got that speech about everybody'd be a combat veteran by the time we got to Nahtrang that kind of sobered us up a little bit and brought us down to earth. It made us think well maybe this really is going to be something here. I just couldn't fathom it.

Q. Did you guys have any weapons?

A. Yes, we had the old M-1's. They already had the M-16's. We didn't get them since we were on communications. What happened at that time was when we got there, the same day or within the same day or two as the first car, they kind of took priority over us so we didn't disembark at Quinhon. They said we'll go to Camrahn. So, we went down to Camrahn which is only about fifty miles from Nahtrang. We lucked out on that, we didn't have to do that 300 mile convoy that the CO had been talking about. It was over either highway one or highway nine-teen from Quinhon to Nahtrang and it was a route that was common to be shot at. We went on down to Camrahn and disembarked, which was a safe area at that time, as was Nahtrang. We convoyed out into the countryside, there was nothing there. Just simply a spot where some engineers had come in and bulldozed the land off and got it physically ready for a tent city that eventually held over 5,000 people. We went in there and built sump holes, a mess hall, and we pitched twenty-four man CP tents.

Q. Were you a kind of construction type of battalion?

A. No, the construction boys had it graded off and ready for us, all we did was pitch our own tent and fix up our mess hall, we did build some latrenes. That was for us. We set up our communication system down by the Nahtrang airport. Nahtrang was a safe area at the time. We put up our concertina wire and built bunkers and so forth.

Q. How long did you stay there?

A. I stayed there the whole time, five months.

Q. What were you doing there, what was your function?

A. We worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week in a communication center in the back of a truck. We relayed messages. They cam in there to be routed on to Saigon, we would route it on send them through the teletype machine to wherever or if they were a message that was ending up there we would take those messages through a courier type of service, deliver them to whoever they were going to in Nahtrang.

Q. Did you taste the war at all? Did you know the VC were there, were there any mortar attacks?

A. We had a couple or three incidents. That's all we really had to bring it home to us. Most of it was just work and sleep. We'd work twelve hours a day and most of the other time that you were off and espically if you were working day time, when you were off at night was curfew. But if you were working the night shift you could get into Nahtrang and do a little sightseeing or drinking, things like that. It was

right on the coast, right on the beach. We did get to the beach to do a little swimming and stuff. The only incidents that happened to really bring the war home to me was one time we took a few mortar shells. That was the scariest time I had. The other time was when one of our planes that had been hit ditched out in the ocean just off shore from us. We weren't right on the beach but we happened to be down by the beach that day. One of our planes did jump in and it killed three pilots. Other than that we took three or four rounds of mortar in one night. As far as any combat experience I guess that was it as far as I'm concerned while I was over there. We had a ten p'clock curfew. One time I was coming back from the town to the tent city. They have trucks to bring you back and I thought I'd missed the last truck and I got this pedicab boy to take me to tent city, it was a couple of miles. I gave him some piastas and said tent city. So, he took me for a say and then we came to a long lonely stretch of road, about a half mile stretch, no lights, no buildings. He stopped and I couldn't understand him but he kept waving his hands and saying no, no. I said why not, I'd had a few drinks, I said hey I gave you the money let's go and he said no, VC out there, he knew how to say that much, and he just kind of held me there. I started to take off walking and he said no, he grabbed me and I got to thinking about that, you know maybe this guy's doing me a favor so I waited there and within fifteen to twenty minutes a truck came by and I flagged it down and got on.

Q. Did you have much to do with the Vietnamese people?

A. Yes. When I was working the night shift we could go into town. Mostly the young guys, we were out drinking and going to bars and clubs. I did meet a couple or three guys in the Vietnamese army and we got together and they could speak English. We ran around one full weekend together, it was a fantastic weekend. They were just so delighted to be with us Americans. We ate together, drank together. It was just a real friendly time, real relaxed.

Q. What was your impression of the Vietnamese people you ran into besides the ARVNS?

A. Well most of them were friendly. Most of the Vietnamese people are poor and I understand when you are that poor you'll do things to survive you normally wouldn't do. But the Vietnamese people I thought were rip off artists. They were into any kind of business you could imagine and would rip you off. One thing I always hated was to go to the laundry. We had one out by tent city, all the workers in this laundry were disabled Vietnamese veterans. It was real depressing to go out there, all the people out there either had no legs or arms, it was really depressing. It was sight to see all the Vietnamese people that had been hurt in the war. It was pitiful. If I'm not mistaken they told me that their commitment to the service was six years after. They could be called on any time. It was really a commitment that they had to make to their country.

- Q. Did they seem to know what they were fighting for? Were they dedicated?
- A. Oh yes. The people I talked to were pretty dedicated to South Vietnam, to the principles of free enterprise and democracy. A lot of people I talked to said the Vietnamese wouldn't fight or wouldn't fight that hard. Now, I don't really know that to be true since I wasn't in a combat situation. The ones I came into contact with were hard working. They wanted to succeed at all cost.
- Q. So, you were there for the five months doing your job and you left when?
- A. I left there on the same day the Bob Hope show came to Nahtrang, I didn't get to see it. I remember I thought about just missing the plane or something. It was December 22, 1965. I was home for Christmas.
- Q. Was that the end of your army service?
- A. Right. I was discharged at Oakland army terminal.
- Q. Did you come back to Ashland right away? You were telling me that you had a series of Jobs didn't you?
- A. Right, I had several jobs, none of which were really noteworthy. I thought about the GI Bill. Both of my sisters were college graduates and I got to thinking about the GI Bill and I found out that it was only good for ten years once you were out. I was working in Lexington at the time and one day I thought I've only got three or four more years to go if I'm going to get help going to school. I think I had a \$1,000 saved up and a 1968 Camaro paid for. I didn't have any more at the time saved up to put in the Camaro and I could just take off. One day I just put all my stuff in the car and drove off. I wanted to come to a place to school where it'd be a little quieter. I thought about going to U.K. but there's a lot of stuff going on down there and I thought since I've been out of school a long time I'll just go to Morehead where it's a little bit slower, a little bit quieter. I need to really concentrate a while--I'd been out of high school for seven years. So, I drove up here.
- Q. When was that?
- A. August of 1971.
- Q. Did you go full time?
- A. Full time and I graduated in three years. I lived with another vet, Jay Murphy, he'd just gotten back from Vietnam and came back to school here. I met him at the first vets club meeting that was advertized. We lived together for three years. Both of us graduated in three years.

Q. Well let me ask you, you came back from Vietnam then, and the war was on until the end of 1973 when we finally pull out. Did you have any feelings about the war, where did you stand on the war? Were you critical of the government or did you support the government? How did it all seem to you at the time?

A. Initially real hawkish, I thought we were doing a job. That's what I did, went over there to do a job. I just thought we should be there, we should be doing that job. We should be helping over there. I don't believe that we should wait until somebody knocks on our door before we get hawkish, if you can see it coming, you ought to get hawkish. So, initially it was like that. I guess I'm like a lot of other people. By the time I started in school in 1971, I'd been back from Vietnam for five or six years. So, just shortly after I started back to school I just thought we were spinning our wheels because so much had happened that the army wasn't being backed up, they weren't going to win. They weren't playing to win. If you go over here and take hill 500, I don't want to give it up in two weeks. I'd rather go over there and take it and keep it. In looking at things like that, why were we there if we weren't going to fight to win, if we weren't going to have the backing to win and bring in everything we had to win. Therefore, I said to myself, there isn't any use being there, let's pull out of there. If were going to give it up slowly, let's give it up all at once and save a few lives.

Q. So, you began to voice your opinion that way, if we can't win let's get out.

A. Yes.

Q. How about 1972, did you agree with McGovern for wanting to get out at that particular time?

A. By 1972 I was ready to get out. Sure, why not, we were just spinning our wheels. A lot of good guys were over there.

Q. Did you vote in 1972?

A. I'm not quite sure about that. I don't believe I did vote that year but I was very opinionated.

Q. Was there very much arguement back and forth on the campus at that time?

A. Oh yes, In 1972 and 1973, that was it, everybody was wearing around MIA buttons POW buttons and the bracelets. That's what everybody was talking about. The vets club was going really strong at that time. We had--when I got in there in 1971 we had ten or thirteen members and by 1973 we had fifty to fifty-five people and we were almost considered on a par with the fraternities as far as social events go.

- Q. I remember that, tell me a little about the veterans organization that you were involved in. You kind of gravitated right to it didn't you?
- A. I didn't want any fraternity because I was older and I liked to think a lot more mature. Looking back on some of those vet club parties I don't know about that. But sure, when I saw that first notice on the wall I went straight to the meeting and ran into some people. Most of them were twenty-four or five years old and had spent their time in Vietnam and we just hit it off big. It really helped me at that time to adjust to college life, not only because of the Vietnam war, but because I'd been out for seven years.
- Q. This was good for you to mix with the fellows?
- A. Yes, the comradere was good. We had our house out there at Copper Hollow, out in the boondocks, nobody to bother us once we got out there. We had our little tussels. Guys would come back from Vietnam still spitting fire. We had a couple of scrapes but nothing even turned serious, nothing that a handshake couldn't cure. We had some good parties, but most of all it was just a place to go where you could set around and talk about Vietnam. There was something there between you that was shared and it brought everybody together. Everybody was coming back about that time and going to school.
- Q. I've talked with a lot of fellows and you're the first one that's mentioned how active the vets club was. There must have been still a lot of fellows that weren't coming.
- A. Yes. We checked the role at the university and somehow we came up with 350 vets enrolled at Morehead and we only had fifty of them.
- Q. What roles did you check?
- A. As far as I know it was people drawing V.A. benefits. We actively recruited those people. We sent letters to them and any vet that was in the club that ever met a vet on campus was supposed to recruit those people, ask them if they wanted to come out and meet some other people that had shared what they had. Come to talk, relax, drink a cold beer, share their experiences. We were also involved in several other things that were more or less community orientated. We worked out a scholarship program where every semester we gave a scholarship to a war orphan, somebody who's father had been killed in the service. It was extra money for those people. We worked it out for various things like that. We had boxing tournaments. That was a pretty good money maker. We did participate in the Kentucky collegiate Veterans Organization.

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Q. Did that survive, do you know?

A. I don't believe that survived. I haven't heard anything.

Q. Do you have any records of it at all or anything?

A. No. I went to a lot of the meetings though. But as far as written records I don't have anything. We had it here once and vets came from almost every university in Kentucky. They came here and we put them up. We had our meeting here and elected officers. We wrote letters to the congressmen and lobbied for Veterans benefits and a Vietnam Veterans bonus which we never got. That was one of the big things that we did.

Q. Did you join the American Legion?

A. Yes, I joined the Legion.

Q. Are you still Active?

A. I'm not really active in the legion.

Q. Do you know Carl Cambell?

A. Yes. Carl used to live with Jay and I for a couple of semesters.

Q. I talked to him a couple of weeks ago and he is one veteran I knew quite well, he was in quite a number of classes with me. But before I get into the people you might know let me ask you about your education at Morehead. Did you feel that you got a good education?

A. Yes I did.

Q. In other words you didn't regret making the decision to come here rather than somewhere else?

A. Right. If somebody had tole me I'd end up in a small town like Morehead at that time, I'd have told them they were crazy. But I love Morehead, this is where I want to stay. I thought I'd end up in Louisville or Lexington or some place. But once I got here and people were friendly and I did have a good school experience. I felt like I had to have a college education. I felt like I wasn't doing that good because like I said my sisters were both college graduates and I always thought less of myself for not being a college graduate. So it was just right for me to go to Morehead. I feel I got a good education and I liked the people. If I hadn't I wouldn't be in the job I'm in now. I had to have a college degree to get the job. I couldn't have done it wigh just a high school education. It's worked out real well for me. I'm glad I did that.