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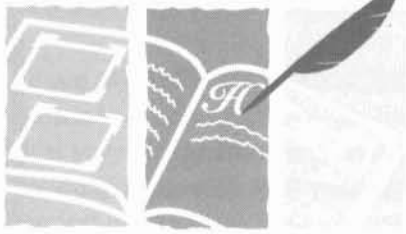
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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 10 Number 1

Winter 2000

Letters from Vietnam: A Soldier's Story

by Allyson Boggess

"All of a sudden I heard all of this tremendous uproar and I came flying out. Here the whole team is standing up on the teamhouse roof looking over in their direction. They had every weapon that they owned firing as fast as they could: tracers, 105 Howitzers exploding on the woodline, grenade launchers, rockets, .50 caliber machine guns. You name it, they had it firing. Boy, what a roar." This was a description of a battle recorded by First Lieutenant David Fetters into his tape recorder some thirty years ago. His attention to detail recreates the events of his days in Vietnam and still manages to register in the ears of those who listen to his collection of audio letters after all these years. The tapes were "letters home" made for his wife and family back home in the United States.

A Holland, Michigan native, David Fetters excelled in basic and advanced infantry training after being drafted in December, 1966. He was given the opportunity to attend officers candidate school where the United States Special Forces (Green Berets) picked him for his hard work and high rank in his class. After further training, Fetters became a First Lieutenant and was sent to Vietnam.

Copies of Mr. Fetters' tapes, a total of twenty-one hours of first hand experiences—daily observations, frustrations, and emotions—have been donated to the Joint Archives of Holland and transcribed to be made available for public use.

Shortly after he arrived in Tay Ninh, Vietnam near the Cambodian border, he started making audio taped letters to his wife, Trudy and his family back home. At times remarking that it was easier to talk into the recorder than sitting down and writing out a letter, these audio letters captured an intense period in Fetters' life while committing an important primary resource detailing soldier life during the Vietnam War to tape.



Handwritten letters cannot capture the sound an automatic weapon makes when it's fired. They cannot echo the curious melody of a Vietnamese singer on a static-ridden radio or the rapidly executed tongue of a Vietnamese woman having a conversation. These moments, captured on tape, breathe life into stale textbook facts learned in history class.

Local ties to Holland and Fetters' down-to-earth personality are what make the impression left by this collection so long lasting. Moments of hope are marked by the relation of a day's worth of work well done, of simple pleasures had with friends Wes and Ron in the service, and of an operation that went smoothly without conflict or casualty.

Operations that went predictably without some sort of contact with the Vietcong were rare. Fetters would often have to go out into the field with his unpredictable Vietnamese soldiers.

(Continued on page 3)

From the Director

As I sit down to write, the snow is swirling outside and winter once again has us in its grasp. In this cold, my preference is to be tucked away in my warm home with a good book or playing on the floor with Amy and Lucy, my two wonderful daughters. But this weather also reminds me of how difficult it must have been for the first Dutch pioneers that ventured into the thick woods surrounding Black Lake a century and a half ago. It is hard to imagine what it was like to travel by ox-cart or on foot through the heavy snow, trying to make a new start in a new land.

Half the world away and more than a century later, another kind of struggle was happening – as far removed from those Dutch settlers as one can imagine. This was a world of war, mortar rounds, and death. Vietnam was about coping – trying to make sense of why you were there, struggling with the flagging support of your countrymen, and working toward your dream of returning home to your friends and loved ones. It was a challenge in its own right, no less dangerous and a situation where hanging onto your dreams was a day to day struggle.

Documenting history is what the Joint Archives is all about. This month we focus on Vietnam and the personal story of a local man who lived through it. His story is unique and, historically speaking, represents the first period of time when technology played a significant role in preserving the story.

David Fetters used a tape recorder to send messages home. It allowed his voice to communicate his “letters” rather than words on the page of a letter. The tape allowed him to communicate more than just words but emotions and feelings. I can only imagine the tears that must have filled his loved ones hearts as they listened from half a world away.

Vietnam was the first conflict when the compact technology of the cassette tape was available to use. It also represents the beginning of a brave new world that now envelops us and includes everything from digital mini-disks to e-mail. Each is a challenge for the archives and how we can preserve memories to tell our story to future generations.

We hope you enjoy this insight into the past. If you would like to know more, please contact us at the Joint Archives. If you have letters, tapes, or other materials relating to World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War or Persian Gulf War, we would be very interested in hearing from you.

Larry J. Wagenaar

The Dutch American Experience

A Conference Celebrating the Career of Robert P. Swierenga

June 9, 2000

June 9 will be a special day as the Joint Archives of Holland, the A. C. Van Raalte Institute, and the Roosevelt Study Center in the Netherlands together sponsor *The Dutch American Experience*, an all-day conference celebrating the career of Dr. Robert P. Swierenga and his outstanding contributions to Dutch American immigration studies.

Swierenga has long been a leading scholar in the field, focusing on numerous aspects of the Dutch American experience. From early efforts that included new quantification approaches to analyze Dutch migration patterns to more current studies of Dutch Jews and Netherlanders in the Chicago area, Swierenga has contributed more than anyone else in the field to our understanding of why these people came and how their lives unfolded in the United States. Publication is currently pending on a comprehensive analysis of the Dutch American history.

Scholars from across the United States and from the Netherlands will be participating in the conference.

Colleagues, former students, family and friends are especially invited to join us for this special day. If you have an interest in Dutch American studies, have been informed by Bob's research, or simply would like to be a part of our effort to thank and recognize him for his life-long contribution, please plan on joining us!

Here are the basics: *The Dutch American Experience* will be held at the Maas Center on the campus of Hope College on Friday, June 9, 2000. A variety of speakers will address aspects of Dutch American studies that intersect with the research Swierenga has undertaken throughout his career. Our guest of honor will also be our keynote speaker for the day. We will conclude the event with a special banquet at which James Schaap, noted writer and storyteller, will read a story specially written for this event.

Please see the insert of this edition of the *Joint Archives Quarterly* for more information.

(Continued from page 1)

At one point, Fetters describes a particularly vital incident pulling back through the jungle during one of his operations: "It is very difficult to run through thick jungle like that with my weapon in one hand, my map in one hand, and the radio handset in one hand. Eyes in front of my head and in back of my head and twenty sets of ears and talking to everybody at once and still trying to coordinate everything and get a hold of my counterpart and give him some help and suggestions and everything. It's just, oh man, you just cannot imagine how it was. During the actual firing I realized that I wasn't scared. I was too busy to be scared."



Fetters repairing damage

Practical problems sometimes called for practical solutions. Living in Vietnam was a far cry different than living at home in the States. The overabundance of flies tended to be a bothersome nuisance in the living quarters. Bug spray was an option but often left the room unusable for a period of time as the fumes were so great. Lt. Fetters decided to take matters into his own hands, and at one point had three frogs caged in his room which took care of the fly problem quite sufficiently. Rats were a different case, infesting the team house and mess hall, causing sanitary health problems.

The building frustration and discouragement while working with the Vietnamese soldiers in camp is a recurring hardship that Fetters focuses in on toward the end of his stay in Vietnam. Tales of the Vietnamese soldiers bold-faced stealing, lying, and abandoning fellow soldiers in need noticeably and understandably anger Fetters. It seems difficult to think about fighting a war for a country whose people seemingly do not care about the outcome.

Narrated and conducted with a reality that can only be conveyed through experience, David Fetters has made a contribution to the Joint Archives of Holland that is unique in his own voice and place in the Vietnam War historical record.

Excerpts from David Fetters' "letters" home:

Tape 1, page 15

"I don't know what to begin with. First of all you heard the little noise in the background. That was the mortar right over on the other side of the clear area, shooting over in the woodline. We had a little action today. I'm a little out of breath because I just climbed to the top of the team house. I'm sitting up here in the cool breeze if you can call it that. It's coming from the south at about 10 miles an hour but it's still about 80 out, 85, something like that. It is considerably cooler than the 110 we get in the daytime. Anyway, the mortars are just shooting out in the woodline just to harass the enemy if they're out there watching us."

Tape 1, page 18

"Every time we stop out there in the boonies, everybody sets up. We set up a perimeter and everything. We have scouts out, listening posts, that kind of thing. All of the Vietnamese quickly whip out their canteens of water and their canteen cups and start hauling out bags of rice and picking flowers and buds and leaves and everything off trees and stalks and pulling up roots. Fifty percent of their meal comes out of the jungle and the other fifty percent is the rice and dried shrimp and mackerel and Chinese noodles... They throw it all in one big pot and make enough for six people.



Captured Vietcong guns

Tape 2, page 13

"Of course, the whole time there were these cotton picking enormous red ants. They drop off the leaves and the bushes and the twigs as well as crawl on your clothing from the jungle floor. For some reason or another, they always go to the vulnerable spots on your body like the back of your neck and my crotch--and boy can they bite. Gee whiz. Half of

the time I'm trying to slap them and knock them off of my clothing as well as keep my forward momentum going to keep up with everybody else. It gets to be a real problem. Those things will dig into your skin and just hang on with all of their might. So I sprayed myself with DDT and put on insect repellent and everything I could find but still they were a problem. ... If it isn't enough that the ants are on you, you've got snakes to worry about and all kinds of other crazy little bugs, leeches, and spiders and stuff that all bite, get on your clothing, and bother the heck out of me. I've got my rifle to keep untangling from all of the vines and terrific thorn bushes out there. The set of tiger fatigues that I wore out there were shredded by the time I got back to camp. Not much I could do about it."

Tape 2, page 22

"Anyway, I really enjoyed your tape last night. I just laid there and I can see everything real clearly in my mind. What you're doing, how you're sitting around the house in your housecoat and puppy sniffing things and chewing on her ball, and the cat scratching up the door to go out. ... I don't know where you actually make the tape but that's just where I picture you, on the living room floor."

Tape 4, page 2

"A lot of the graves were uncovered and there were skulls and hands and arms and chest cavities and legs and everything all over the place. Feet, most of them still had clothes attached to the bodies and some of them still had meat on the bones. ... I came across one skull. The mouth was wide open and of course it was a perfect skull. Big hollow eye sockets and nose sockets. The mouth was wide open. It still had a North Vietnamese Army helmet on the skull. ...

Tape 4, page 23

"Also when I got back in today I found out that over at Katum there was an M-79 round laying out on the runway and an artillery lieutenant and an enlisted man saw it there. They got out of their jeep and went over to it and they looked at it and they couldn't tell whether or not it was a dud round or just one that somebody had dropped or I guess it didn't enter their mind that it was a booby trap. So they went to pick the thing up and it killed the enlisted man and wounded the officer. He's in satisfactory condition now. At night, sometime during the night, a Vietcong snuck up to the runway and laid the booby trap right in the middle of it. You might think it's funny that the VC can come up so close the camp. It's not at all rare to find that when you go outside your camp in the morning you'll see signs on your barbed wire

fences. "The VC were here," and "We kill all Wauki" which is Vietnamese for Americans. ...

Tape 4, page 29

"I haven't got a whole lot to tell you this time. I had a pretty good night's sleep out in the jungle last night in spite of the rain. I had my hammock set up and then my poncho over the top of that about a foot and a half above me. I remained high and dry and slept soundly in spite of the lightning and the thunder and the rain coming down on the poncho and all of the artillery going over head. I don't know who was shooting what last night but there was some mighty big rounds going over our head made a terrific crack when they went over head. It must have been 155's or 8 inch or 175's which is about the biggest gun we have over here. Instead of just the normal whistling sound, like a 105 makes, this thing made a clap just like a thunderclap when it went over. When the round hit the ground it just shook the whole area. Just rattled trees and everything."



Bomb damage

Tape 4, page 34

All of a sudden, the same as last time I was on radio watch, I started hearing these explosions. I'm getting to the point now where as soon as one of those things goes off I can tell it's an incoming. ... So I jumped up and ran around and woke everybody up and stepped back into the commo bunker. Just about at that time, one landed ten feet outside the commo bunker. Man, oh man what a noise. Just a smashing, jarring, thudding jolt. We have one air vent that the air conditioner sits in. The wall's about five feet thick there but the air vent goes straight through. It landed ten feet away from the wall on the air vent side so a lot of the noise, dust, and everything, dirt, came flying in that air vent and got blown through the air conditioner fan and everything. The commo room filled up with dust and smoke. I went out choking and gagging. ...

On the way the VC knocked off two CRP bunkers, I've got a picture of one of them, he put two rounds right smack-dab through the top of our mess hall, and boy you should see the mess. ... Two great big holes in the roof that blew off most of the roof. The entire inside was just completely ripped to shreds. Everything in there was just blasted to pieces. ... All of our plastic spoons and silverware were shredded bits of plastic on the floor. Pieces of tin from the roof were blown into the walls. Of course shrapnel had blown a lot of the boards off the side of the mess hall and put holes through it. Shrapnel went through the wooden walls. It went right through double thicknesses of two by fours and then out through the chain link fence.

Tape 8, page 22

"Boy these flies around here, they sure get all over the place. They're bothersome. Like when you're outside working, a fly will land on your nose and you swat it away and it will come right back and land in your eye or in your ear, or on your eyebrow or your cheek or your chin. They just keep coming right back, keep coming back, keep coming back. Of course they're so fast you can't hit them. Boy they get aggravating. Bug spray doesn't do any good because you sweat that off in a matter of two minutes. So the only thing to do is just keep working hard, try to forget about them.

A couple guys on the team this past week had amoebic dysentery. I think the reason why is because of the fly problem. Mainly it's in the mess hall. We're just now getting around to putting up new screen around the mess hall because we didn't have any to replace the screens perforated by all of the shrapnel when our mess hall was hit. The flies in that place were terrific. They would land on everything. That's why I always had to hold one hand over my drinking cup to keep the flies off of it. Between mouthfuls I had to wave the flies off my food or away from my food. Now we finally got the screen wire."

Tape 12, page 16

"Well, there's a definite difference in firing between M16s firing away from you and the VC weapons firing towards you. When a rifle is aimed at you and fired it's got a definite crack. I don't know whether it's the crack of the bullet going by or what but anyway, I could hear this terrific cracking from all of these automatic weapons pointed in our direction. I wasn't looking straight up above me but there were branches and sticks and leaves falling down on us all that were laying there. We could hear bullets going over head and believe it or not they, some of them actually go zip. That's what it sounds like, just a high pitched little zip and you hear some of them ricochet. You hear some of them hitting branches,

some of them snap, and crack, but of course there are hundreds and hundreds of them going over head all at once. Just a tremendous volley of what sounds like machine gun fire but actually it's just like I said, a number of automatic weapons. And of course these doggone B40 rockets. They fired in all between 20 and 30. Nobody got an actual count."

Tape 12, page 21

"Boy, a 500 pound bomb going off that close is something to behold although it's not a very pleasant experience. It literally picked us up off the ground and slammed us back down, the concussion was so great. I felt it did some good. After finally breaking contact for the last time and getting everybody settled down into a good perimeter, weapons loaded and everything I immediately asked around, you know, I asked all of the commanders, platoon leaders, company commanders and everything for an estimate of the situation and what their status was for ammo and wounded and things like that and I found out we had eight people wounded and one man who was killed. ...



David and Trudy Fetters, 1970

All photos in this story are courtesy of the David Fetters family.

A complete copy of David Fetters' transcripts are at the Joint Archives of Holland. If you have or know of others that have letters, diaries, or other materials from the Vietnam War or the 1960s and 70s, please contact us.

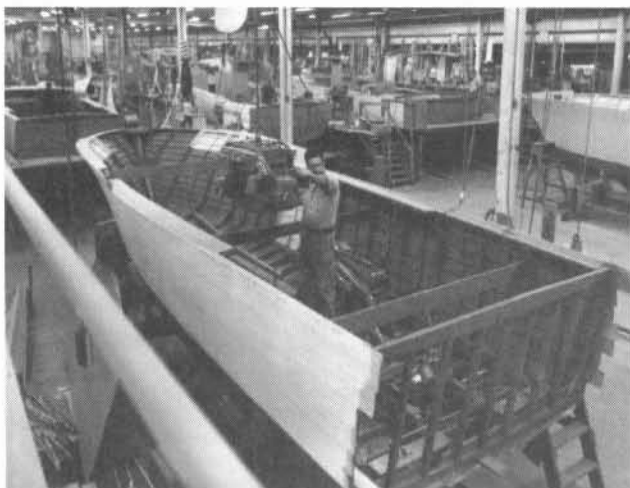
From the Collections Archivist

The following are a few of the many new collections recently processed and now open for research.

T99-1540. MacLeod, Roger L.

Records, 1956-1985. 1.00 linear ft.

Collection includes records of the Chris-Craft Company of Holland plant facilities including a photograph album (1956-1974), and workers union and employee benefits materials.



Holland Museum/Joist Archives

Chris-Craft boat under construction, c.1950

T99-1545. Strom, Lois T.

Records, 1940-1981. 0.50 linear ft.

Collection includes: Chris-Craft Company sales brochures 1940-1966; shareholder correspondence; annual and quarterly reports, 1978-1981; and Chris-Craft/Roamer Yachts brochures, 1963-1964.

H99-1371. Vander Broek, John.

Papers, 1913-1915. 0.50 linear ft.

A member of the Hope College class of 1917, Vander Broek assembled a wonderful collection of college and local photograph images into a "memory book" that many Hope students created earlier in the century.

H97-1294. Koeppe, Elizabeth (Renskers)

Papers, 1917-1918. 0.50 linear ft.

A member of the Hope Preparatory School class of 1917 she later attended Hope College (1917-1919) until marrying her college sweetheart. She left Hope College to serve with her husband, Edwin Koeppe, as missionaries in Amoy, South Fukien province, China (1919-1951). Later in life she served as housemother of Columbia Cottage at Hope College (1956-1963). This collection contains notes, student essays

and papers, course and examination papers of Elizabeth Renskers while a student at Hope Preparatory School and Hope College from 1912-1919.

W89-1010. Swart, Rev. J. Robert and Morrell F.

Papers, 1948-1996. 2.00 linear ft.

Both graduates of Hope College, the Swarts began their ministry at Grace Reformed Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where Robert served as pastor for two years before being appointed missionaries in 1946. In 1948 the Swarts were among the first group of Reformed Church of America missionaries to work in Africa which was established in the South Sudan among the Anuak tribe. This work was undertaken in association with the United Presbyterian Mission. In 1963 the Swarts were forced to leave the Sudan due to an impending civil war. They then began working with the Geleb tribe in Ethiopia until 1977 when internal strife necessitated another relocation, this time across the border to Geleb lands in Kenya.



Western Seminary/Joist Archives

Robert and Morrell Swart receive honorary degree from Hope College President Gordon Van Wylen, 1981

Robert became coordinator of the American Missions Medical-Educational-Agricultural Development Program, initiated the use of windmills for irrigation and developed an effective cassette tape ministry. Morrell was editor of the *Ethio-Echo* from 1972 to 1978, and together they had six children. The Swarts received honorary doctor of humane letters degrees from Hope College in 1981 and retired in 1988. Robert received the Distinguished Alumni award from Western Theological Seminary in 1999. The collection includes correspondence, articles, and newsletters from of the Reverend J. Robert Swart and his wife Morrell F. Swart concerning their African ministries in the Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. Also includes materials relating to the Food From Wind project which uses windmills for irrigation.

Rev. Robert Swart passed away in January, 2000.

A Legacy of Leaders

In conjunction with the inaugural year of Hope College's 11th president, the Joint Archives of Holland is presenting the exhibit "A Legacy of Leaders" to commemorate those who have served in the office.

The exhibit opened with an unveiling and reception on Wednesday, October 20 at the Joint Archives, and included remarks by Hope president James Bultman and provost Jacob Nyenhuis.



(l-r: Provost Jacob Nyenhuis, President James Bultman and his wife, Martie, Director Larry Wagenaar)

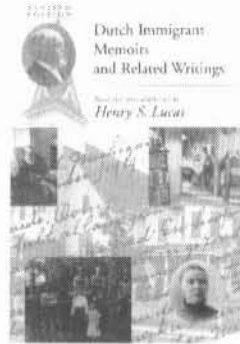
Using unique photographic images and Hope memorabilia found in the archives, the exhibit tells the story of how the college was shaped by those who have served as president since Hope was chartered in 1866. In addition to chronicling the college's growth and development, the display also describes some of the challenges that have faced Hope's leaders.

"Our goal was to encapsulate some of the most important impressions from each person who has served as Hope's president," said Larry J. Wagenaar, who is director of the Joint Archives of Holland and an associate professor at Hope. "We hope the exhibit will lead those who visit to a deeper understanding of the breadth of Hope's leadership and how profoundly it can affect the direction and success of the school."

The exhibit will run through May of 2000.

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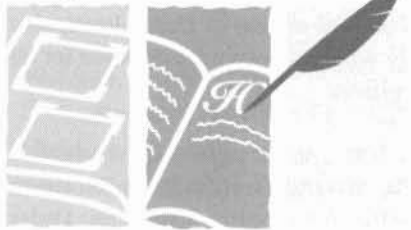
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David Fetters in Vietnam, 1969

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