

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

Don Griffis

An interview conducted on

February 15th, 2022

Interviewers: Dr. Bruce Hunt Jr. and Dr. Allison Huntley

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“William and Don Griffis Vietnam War Oral History Archive”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Don Griffis are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on February 15, 2022 by Don Griffis.

Interviewers: Dr. Bruce Hunt Jr. and Dr. Allison Huntley

Transcriber: Daisy Herr

Editor: Camille Huffman

The electronic file and complete transcript of this interview were processed in the Department of History at Angelo State University and are available at the Dr. Ralph R. Chase West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

HUNT: Okay, uh, my name's Bruce Hunt. I'm here with Dr. Allison Huntley, and Don Griffis. It is March 8th, 2022. It's about eleven a.m., and we are here to interview Mr. Griffis for the William Don Griffis Vietnam War Oral History Archive Project. Um, we will be asking a series of questions. We also hav- will be discussing his book, uh, *Eagle Days- uh- A Marine Legal/ Infantry Officer in Vietnam*, which is a record of his experiences during his deployment in Vietnam. Um, so we'll get right to it, and we'll start out with the very basics. Mr. Griffis, in your own voice, what is your name?

GRIFFIS: Don Griffis.

HUNT: When and where were you born?

GRIFFIS: Um, born in Lubbock, Texas- August 1st, 1942.

HUNT: And where did you grow up?

GRIFFIS: Uh, basically here in San Angelo. Um, my dad was in the Navy in World War II, and when he was discharged, uh, he came to San Angelo and brought the family here.

[paper rustling]

HUNT: When and where did you enter the armed forces?

GRIFFIS: Uh, I was a student at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, in 19- I guess it was '61, uh, and recruiters were there on campus, and, uh, I had nothing better to do, and went over to interview with them or just to find out what they were doing, and uh, it looked interesting. And I always had a- a history in- in- inclination.

HUNT: And those recruiters were for the Marine Corps?

GRIFFIS: Yes.

HUNT: [mumbles] Let me get that down. [louder] And that was the only branch that you served in?

GRIFFIS: That's the only branch.

HUNT: Okay. And what were your years of service?

GRIFFIS: It- it would've been, uh, uh, actual, uh, active duty, uh, would be, uh, 1967 through 1970. I went back after, uh, I was discharged from active duty, I clerked for a federal judge in Dallas, but I missed the Marine Corps, uh, and I went back into the Reserves, and served an additional three years.

HUNT: Ah, and those years if I'm looking at this- '79 is when you were discharged so-

GRIFFIS: Yes.

HUNT: So, uh, '76 probably, went into the Reserves. Um, which military conflict did you serve during?

GRIFFIS: The Vietnam [stutters] War.

HUNT: And, uh, which units did you serve in?

GRIFFIS: Uh, a unit called uh, Force Logistics Command-

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: - that, uh, dealt with getting the supplies, uh, uh, ammunition, food- the resources the Marine Corps needed, uh, to be able to carry out its mission, uh, in Vietnam.

HUNT: Mhm-hm. And uh, during- during that time in your unit, your rank and position?

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, I was a 1st Lieutenant, uh- uh, for uh, about six months, and then was promoted, uh, uh, to Captain, and I was a Captain throughout my- rest of my tour in Vietnam.

HUNT: Okay, those are the basics. Not too bad.

[All laugh]

HUNT: We got the- the, uh, the- the outline. Uh, and so now getting a little more into uh, into your- your thinking along the way from the different stages of this experience, why did you enlist, and then, what was your training like?

GRIFFIS: [clears throat] I enlisted because, uh- it- it- we had the draft, uh, still at that time.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And uh, when I was talking to the recruiting officers, really just thinking I was killing time, but I was drawn into, uh, talking to the captain and his sargeant that were there on recruiting duty. And, their comment to me was: 'you're gonna have to go sometime anyway, why don't you join the best- join the Marine Corps.' And, uh, uh that just seemed peachy keen to me.

HUNT: [chuckles]

GRIFFIS: So, I did it-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - and uh, went two summers, uh, uh, to Quantico, Virginia for training for bootcamp-

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: - and uh, uh, you went, uh, half a summer, uh, two different years, and then, once you were through with bootcamp, you were promoted to 2nd Lieutenant. Uh, uh- and, uh, then when you graduated from college, uh, you were commissioned as a, uh, 2nd Lieutenant.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, I was a 1st Lieu- then I moved up in rank to 1st Lieutenant, uh, which lasted about as I said, six months, and uh, I was promoted to Captain.

HUNT: Did you find that to be an accelerated promotion?

GRIFFIS: It was probably, uh, routine.

HUNT: Okay. Do you have any memories from the training? Did you find it difficult, surprising, in any way?

GRIFFIS: I- I- it- it was- in many ways, was, uh, uh very interesting. Uh, you had a group of-all of us that were qualified to be officers. Uh, uh, they were the kind of people you'd enjoy being around, uh, and uh, from colleges all over the country.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, it- you were constantly working out in your various activities, besides classroom drill. Uh, uh- the weather in Virginia, particularly in the wintertime, can be brutal.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Looking at the events on TV today of, uh, what's going on in, uh, Ukraine, seeing all these people out in the cold, I can just feel that again.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, it's just miserable.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, one event that just stood- stands out is, uh, when you were at the time of completing your task- uh, your training. Uh, we, uh- we were given our assignments, told uh, where we would be going to serve, uh, but the- but the thing was, uh, at this- at this same time there was a, uh, Navy ship- the uh, *Pueblo*- that uh, was captured by the North Koreans, I believe, and the war drums were beating over that. Uh, they had our crew as hostages, and people were saying send in the Marines. We were the Marines, and nobody was eager to go fight in that brutal type of environment.



HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: They started us out at midnight in, uh, uh, in our different scenarios we were supposed to react to, but uh- uh- the Marine Corps had built a Vietnamese village, uh- uh, to practice-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - uh, uh, what you would do if you were called upon to go into a village in a firefight.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And it was so cold, you just sat there waiting for dawn to come, and it was like it never would.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: You were so cold, and I looked up- I was leaning against a tree, uh, on a pathway as we were drawing this carton around the village, and I saw a person jog by me. And I couldn't believe- what would a person be out here this time of day, uh, and he disappeared and then a few minutes later, another person did. And I blinked my eyes, and they were gone. I was hallucinating.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: It was how cold it was. Now, that didn't help much in describing my tour in Vietnam [laughs]. I mean, in the Marines, but uh, the training was very realistic, uh, and helpful. But you can only show so much, and people have to react with their own common sense.

HUNT: Yes, sir. Um, getting into a memory from the book, it seems like you encountered a lot of people from Texas.

GRIFFIS: There were a lot of people from Texas.

[All laugh]

HUNT: I wonder- was that- was true in your training? Did- did it seem like Texas was sorta over represented?

GRIFFIS: Well, in fact, uh, the first summer that I, uh, went into bootcamp, uh, the summer after my freshman year, uh, they seemed to draw on areas like a block- keeping people together.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, I'm not sure if there is any particular reason for it, but-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: We did- did have, uh, uh [stutters] the way the training went, you'd have a, uh, uh lieutenant or a captain who would be, uh, in charge of our platoon- our, uh, uh- and he had a sargent as his assistant. Uh, the lieutenant was from Pennsylvania- red-headed, I remember him directly, and uh, pretty much a, a, an oddball. [chuckles]

HUNT: Uh, is that uh, Mr. Hale? Is that Terry Hale?

GRIFFIS: No, no. Terry Hale was a great guy.

HUNT: Oh, okay.

GRIFFIS: But, uh, uh- it- it ain't ra- usually, the officer's the good guy. The sergeant is the bad guy.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: It got reversed on us.

HUNT: [chuckles]

GRIFFIS: And the sergeant was so supportive and helpful, and he wouldn't gonna say anything negative about the lieutenant.

HUNT: Hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, be unprofessional, but you could tell there, he thought the lieutenant was off-base. And the- the demands, and the hurrey-ups, and the times it didn't have to be that way- it was like almost harassment.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Some of that, uh, it was done on purpose because, uh, everything that you're going to be involved in, in a military, uh, showdown with so- with whoever our enemy was at the time, uh, it- it, uh, at any rate, DJ Kato the sergeant-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - uh, was quite an inspiration to us, uh, and- and helped us keep our enthusiasm up for serving. Uh, oddly enough, when I got to Vietnam, uh, I went- it was after the Battle of Hue, had- was over, and a few of us went over to see what the- the- the [stutters] the old city, uh, imperial city looked like. And, and this big man said, 'Captain, I don't- I think we know each other', and I said, 'well, tell me about it, Sergeant.'

HUNT: [laughs]

GRIFFIS: And he said, 'Well, I was your drill instructor in Quantico,' and he was now been commissioned to captain. Uh, and it was such a pleasure in the midst of a different world, uh, to run into someone that you knew and admired. Uh, just a small thing in life, but it, uh, left a lasting imprint.

HUNT: Does it strike you at all that he recognized you before you recognized him?

GRIFFIS: Uh, maybe my glasses were not too good.

HUNT: Oh

[All laugh]

GRIFFIS: But you didn't- in a large organization- it can be a corporation- uh, uh, it is fun to, uh, run into people, uh, uh, that you hadn't seen in a long time, and to be reminded of those good times.

HUNT: Guess so. Um, great, um- so, uh, my next question is: So what conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment? What America, uh- uh, what did it symbolize to you initially, and then, um, y'know, we'll get into maybe how that evolved or changed.

GRIFFIS: Sure

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Well, uh, the president at the time that we're talking about was Lyndon Johnson, and he had a, a, a handful of uh, having to step forward and fill the shoes of a very popular president, uh, John F. Kennedy. Uh, uh, and he had Civil Rights issues that were uh, necessary to handle. Uh, it was a time of civil unrest in the community- uh, in the country, and uh, it- it was a- when we were there, we would hear the news. Uh, uh we had radios. You could pick up things, uh, which ya could tell the mood of the country was changing but it didn't really attract so much ire and perception at that time because we had a job to do. Uh, so there wouldn't a lot of questioning, it was a matter that you signed up and you're going, uh, and I didn't regret that at all. [clears throat] But Johnson tried to do- to pacify- pacify the public with a policy of guns in butter uh, where, uh, the hawks would be given more troops to send in Vietnam and constantly building up the troop level, uh, and at home, trying to keep prices low on foodstuffs, gasoline, fuel- the things that a country runs on. [stutters] A- a- and that didn't really affect me or the people I was around. We didn't become overnight pro-war or anti-war. Uh, uh, we had our duties to do, uh, but it was furthered- in fact, I- I played football in college and our- we were a small school, and didn't have a large uh, uh..

HUNT: Team?

GRIFFIS: Team. That's was right, and uh, we-the student body, didn't necessarily think that Saturday afternoon had to be for football, could be for a whole lotta things, didn't have on the campus- it wouldn't a- a something that was all encompassing like a big game between A&M, and Texas-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - or whatever. Uh, we were vaguely- we were aware always that there were disturbances at home, but I didn't- it really made no difference in my outlook at the time.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS:Uh, after I- after my tour was over, and I was heading home, uh, we landed- uh, the jet carrying us landed in, I believe it was San- uh, San Diego, and it was maybe four in the morning and these elderly people- uh, of which I am now one.

HUNT: [laughs]

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, the- these people came in with sandwiches and coffee and cold drinks. They were so nice, but they would question us about it- our experience in the war-

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: - and really, it- we weren't there to talk about it, we wanted to get home.

HUNT: Right

GRIFFIS: But it struck me as odd that I could tell that from their questioning that things were changing. Yeah. And then I went up to San Francisco to catch the next flight that would carry me to Dallas and on home to San Angelo, and I went to the ticket counter, and here's this probably nineteen, twenty year old blonde goddess.

HUNT: [chuckles]

GRIFFIS: That was just- she was beautiful, and I just sat there gaping at her, and went up and handed my, uh, ticket to her, and she said, 'How many babies did you kill in Vietnam?' And I was so startled by that, I didn't have a response.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: I just walked away. But, the idea that number one, an employer would allow an employee to take that kind of an attitude- that was just startling. Uh, but the animosity, and then as we- as I was walking through the DFW terminal to come home, uh, I was in uniform, and people would move away from me as I was passing by. It was like I had some kind of a disease.

HUNT: Wow



GRIFFIS: Uh, it- it- it was a difficult time. I was assigned back to, uh, Quantico, Virginia, uh, after a thirty-day leave at home, and uh, we were told not to wear any uniforms, uh, into Washington D.C. Uh, so we went in, a group of us- uh, we knew there was going to be something at the, uh, downtown, uh- uh around as close- fairly close to the White House.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: A huge demonstration, but these people were all carrying communist flags-

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: - and North Vietnamese flags. And you- walking by these people, it wouldn't unusual for one of 'em to throw something- their drink on you, uh, and you had to stay in control of yourself. Uh, the country was in an uproar. Johnson couldn't fix things, and he resigned- uh, or wouldn't- didn't choose to run again. Uh, uh, the country was in upheaval.

HUNT: And this would've been '69?

GRIFFIS: Uh, yes, uh-huh.

HUNT: Yeah. Well, I, uh, an- and- and so you didn't, uh, your thinking about what the United States stood for didn't change very much over the course of the deployment, but there are some

moments where- I don't know if these are maybe later reflections but for example, there's uh, a moment in the book where you describe watching a movie. I've never seen the movie, but the way you described it- it was called Gee Gee?

GRIFFIS: Yeah

HUNT: And there's a reflection in there about um, the sadness of dying in a far off war. And I don't know if that reflects some larger theme of your thoughts over the time about being away from home and feeling disconnected, and whether you felt anything about that.

GRIFFIS: Yes, but uh, uh, it was a moment where you could relax-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, and watch a film- uh, before going out for whatever your duties were going to be that day. Uh, the movies were a help to, uh, keep people mentally attached to their families, and loved ones back home. But uh, yeah, they were- they were a morale builder.

HUNT: Okay

GRIFFIS: Uh, and of course you were often thinking about your family and friends at home.

HUNT: Okay

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, the movie was a welcome distraction.

HUNT: Okay, okay. Not much more beyond that. [laughs]

GRIFFIS: It's - it's they- they- as a part of it, building morale, uh, they, uh, the military through contracts, uh, brought in different bands and groups. In fact, I- I went to see- trying to, uh, think of the entertainer that- uh, Bob Hope.

HUNT: Oh?

GRIFFIS: Uh, his show came shortly before Christmas in '69, uh- uh, and- it would've been in '69. And it was kinda in an amphitheater environment.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: With lots of people there, Ann-Margaret was with Bob Hope.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And he was funny and risqué, and the band was great. Uh, that was a beautiful high point.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, you'd go from gut-wrenching experiences, uh, uh to great entertainment. Uh, it's all a part of life.

HUNT: I think you've got the- it sounds rereading it, that those moments were crucial for you- for your ability to kind of relax for a moment.

GRIFFIS: That's right.

HUNT: Uh, great. Well I think that's- I mean, we can pivot to uh, uh, the cover- the cover of *Eagle Days* has a picture of yourself, and uh, I think in the book when it appears, it's a- you made some new friends, uh, and these are some local Vietnamese children.

GRIFFIS: Yes.

HUNT: And they're- so the question is, uh, what did you think of local inhabitants that you encountered? Um, yeah.

GRIFFIS: Well, they were people just like we were. Uh, uh, different cultures as well. Uh, part of my duties, I volunteered after I had been about a month in country. Uh, there was- our base was protected by uh, what was called a provisional rifle company, uh that whose job was to deal with the security of the base, and go out, uh, into the rice paddies and jungles, uh, uh to try and

find the Viet Cong. Uh, in doing so, I would visit vil- different villages, and I'd have an interpreter with me.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, but I always brought something for the children.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh and as you can see on the cover-

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: They weren't afraid of us at all. Uh, they'd come up and want chewing gum, and candy and-

HUNT: [laughs]

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

GRIFFIS: And things that they thought was fun. Who knows- their dad may at night have been a Viet Cong.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, and our base had lots of, uh, uh Vietnamese workers working inside the base.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And- some of them had to be VC, watching and reporting what we were doing.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: But I got to- in working with the civil- uh- uh- employ- or the civilians- the Vietnamese, uh, they were many- they were really fine people. Uh, we had a Sergeant Min who was a big man for a, a Vietnamese, and he had been fighting the Communists since the French Indochina War.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And had an enormous amount of knowledge about the people and we could talk.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, it- it- it was an, uh, interesting, uh, to meet a person like that in a foreign country at war.

HUNT: Mhm [pause] Did, um, did you get a sense for, um, the local conceptions towards Americans? It sounds like it was very divided. That's-

GRIFFIS: It was.

HUNT: Yes, yeah.

GRIFFIS: Uh, because the people had a choice. Uh, even if they supported- if they were educated, if they were professors like yourselves, uh, uh, they were all marked for assassination.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, the Vietnamese, uh, wanted their country united, but it was going to be under communist dictatorship.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And we were against that. Uh, but, uh, they- in the process, they- they didn't hesitate, uh, to, uh, execute anybody that wasn't- wouldn't show that they supported the VC.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: So- or the North Vietnamese. Uh, but the people- if they had a choice, they just wanted a chance, uh, to lead their own lives, and raise their children.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Like anybody. But they could be turned against us by small groups of armed North Vietnamese or, uh, uh, Viet Cong.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, I'm glad as many were able to make their way to America as did. I think they made the con- the country a better place.

HUNT: Mhm. Um, so, um, getting more into maybe some of the- of the central, uh, plot you could say of the book is how you come in as a legal officer, but you've, you request- sounds like almost insist to be more involved with patrols and...

GRIFFIS: In the Marine Corps, you, uh, are given a military occupational specialty designation.

HUNT: Mhm-hm



GRIFFIS: Uh, because I'd graduated from law school, mine was to be a legal officer.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, I wanted to be more involved in the struggle, uh, than just trying lawsuits- mainly marijuana, drug use.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Low grade criminal behavior, but anything that distracted from being alert out in the field. Uh, we had numerous instances- notta, not a lot, but, uh, of troopers, uh, getting out- away from the base, and going into the villages so they could buy drugs, uh, and then they go out on patrol and get themselves killed.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Because they- it is- it wasn't a place for recreational drugs. But that- that kinda was building up- the use of drugs, uh the longer the war went on.

HUNT: Mhm-hm. Despite the attempt to enforce a prohibition on it, the behavior didn't change?

GRIFFIS: It- for some it did, but, uh, uh- for those who were hardcore, and uh, weren't the best of the lot, it- you- you- those are the ones that I dealt with through court martials- administrative discharges.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, we did have instances, uh, where some disgruntled trooper would throw a hand grenade under an officer's desk- uh, hut, uh, hoping to kill him, and being on drugs- lost some very fine men that way.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, it was a very different situation to be in, other than being at home-

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: - where if you did something, it wo- didn't necessarily mean you were gonna end up dead.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, you just think you're having a good time. Uh, but any rate, uh, uh, when I didn't, I watched and saw the provision rifle company was made of volunteer officers and men, and they were losing- their commanding officer was rotating home.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And I asked if I- I talked to my colonel in our legal shop if he would give me permission to do a second job, uh, which would be help- help man the rifle company.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And he- he- he agreed. Told me, uh, uh, uh- he made me promise I wouldn't get hurt or killed because they had too much work to do.

[All laugh]

HUNT: Not gonna get out that easy [laughs]

GRIFFIS: But he was a great older- great older man, and uh, that led me into then naturally needing to learn the job. I'd go out on patrols uh, uh, and operations. Uh, uh, we were across a road from an army helicopter maintenance unit. They brought in- the army brought in shot up helicopters and what- they were patched up and reused.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, and [clears throat] they, uh, we had- we had night assaults with helicopters. They were- we attacked enemy villages.

HUNT: Yes.

GRIFFIS: That was a situation where, uh, we were able to so, so completely surprise them, uh, that we captured their leader who was a Viet Cong district chief.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Lot of people would tease me- say what's the lawyer doing, stomping around in rice patties?

HUNT: [chuckles]

GRIFFIS: And uh, actually I- at least two of my lieutenants- who were in my company- were lawyers, and uh, I think what I was doing appealed to them and they joined, uh, the rifle company too.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh- but it- it- it was a thrilling experience.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, everything, uh, just so different. Uh, uh going on rice patty dikes, uh, as you're patrolling, uh, Vietnamese water buffalo-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - uh were, always a fixture, uh, with little boys riding them.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, taking care of them. Uh, uh, it- you could go for weeks, and nothing seemed to happen, and then it was nothing but bombardments, uh-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - on your base. Uh, uh, uh, for- uh, uh, another period of time. And of course, battles were ranging all over I Corps which was the northern most, uh-

HUNT: Area?

GRIFFIS: Area that the Marines were operating in.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: But, uh, uh- I wanted the task and was fortunate to get it, and very fortunate not to get hurt.

HUNT: I believe you say right at the end that this- your period- the period there- your service there, you felt most alive.

GRIFFIS: Yeah, uh, I did. And- and, uh, do you mind if I read a little bit from that?

HUNT: Sure, sure.

GRIFFIS: I- I- I thought that was- it captures my thoughts at the time. Uh [paper rustling] And if I'm taking too long on this, you let me know. Uh, [reading aloud] 'We're making good progress' - this was 24th of June, 1968.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: 'We're making good progress now with the bunker being built behind our hooch. We have hired four Chieu Hois [?]' -parenthesis, Vietnamese defectors from the VC, close parenthesis- 'to dig, and already they've exca- excavated a nice pit about six feet deep, eighteen

feet long. We plan to sandbag and reinforce the walls, put in wooden beams, steel matting, and sandbags on the roof, and settle back for the fireworks. We hope that our construction crew does not inform their former friends about our location. [paper rustling] Tonight the world seems to be slumbering in the heat of the Asian dusk with only slight breezes whispering across the sands. There's a vague peacefulness in the darkening slopes of the surrounding mountains, which are outlined by a pinkish rose haze in the twilight. As I sit here sweating, the gathering gloom wraps its fingers around the silent vehicles and settles on the red glow of cigarette tips. I think of home, my family, and the rich expectations of the future. I also have an ever increasing conviction that when my service, country, and fellow man each in his own way, are run the risk of never having lived'

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, that [pause] so, uh, I'm not sure what your question was then.

HUNT: Yes- well, it's just, we're establishing how you- how you felt, and how you got through it, and- and this very interesting aspect of it, is that in a- in a way, it was very rewarding. It was very exciting in a way- uh, that it wasn't just for fear and suffering.

GRIFFIS: No, it- it- you can't- you crack up if you were just- if that's all you paid attention to.

HUNT: Yes, sir.

GRIFFIS: Uh, we had a job to do, but there were other things that needed to be done too, so.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh- and- and you- there's a strong sense of pride. Uh, uh, uh, of being in a warzone as a Marine.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, the other branches were equally- I'll- I'll say equally, I'm prejudiced, but, but-

HUNT: [chuckles]

GRIFFIS: - there, we had a night helicopter assault on a village, and, uh, I had gone over and talked to the Army. We had gotten a report from, uh, military intelligence that there was going to be a- a mortar attack on the base within a three day period. They couldn't say which day for sure- but it was- it was imminent.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And so I- with that knowledge, I went and talked to the base commander, and wanted authority to take our company on a midnight, uh, uh, activity, and [clears throat] they, they agreed. So I went across the road and talked to these two colonels- the Army colonels.



HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And told 'em what I wanted to do, and could- could we borrow a couple of their helicopters?

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And, uh, I always was so proud- uh, they were older men, uh, uh, and they congratulated us, and, uh, the two colonels- the commanding officers and his executive officer- they flew the helicopters that took us in-

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: - uh, uh, to the village. Uh, there was a lot of pulling together, uh, that took place.

HUNT: Mhm-hm. That's incredible. Um, I- I have to think that the, the- something about, um, officer to officer there that maybe transcended the branch-

GRIFFIS: Oh yeah

HUNT: - uh, distinction. That sounds very, very, very exciting. Um, were, uh, all around this, but we haven't quite dived in on it, but um, what were race- race relations like in your unit?

GRIFFIS: It depended on the unit and on the- on the leadership.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, and it was a complex issue. Uh, uh particularly as morale seemed to go downhill, uh, in America, in our home country. Uh, we had fine Marines. They were black Marines. Uh, we had good white Marines. I don't mean to over go- gloss it, but-

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, the young men that, uh, joined, uh, that enlisted, uh, uh, as men, instead as, as officers, uh, that by and large, uh, they were the ones that- that were the voices of moderation. Uh, but you'd always have some that have a problem with, uh, some of those who were, uh, just looking for trouble. And if they're not in an actual infantry unit, they had time on their hands, and they created problems.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, there were beatings. There were some fights.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: But uh, it wasn't the norm.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, probably in some places, uh, i- it- [stutters] in some places, you certainly had- black particularly sergeants step up, and tell the younger men, uh, what they needed to do.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh there were, uh, uh- I had a case involving a, a black, uh corporal- Corporal Eisen [spelling unsure]

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Who was, uh, uh, worked with the CAP program, uh, uh, which was a civil action program in the- among the Vietnamese. And uh, he had been in country for several years, uh, extending each time the six month duty, uh, was completed.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: And after being gone for, uh, thirty days, went back to his CAP unit, and was greeted by the executive officer there who told him that he needed to go in and see the old man, the

commanding officer, because uh, Eisen had not reported, uh, to the airport to fly back to his country, to Baltimore, like he had- as he had made out in his travel plans.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And the Marine Corps has to know where its people are-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: - and that was something that couldn't be tolerated. Uh, but after saying those words, he said, but by the way, the colonel thinks it's, uh, this is kinda of a, a low impact problem. Uh, I'll read him his right to act, and he'll go back to work. Well, uh, Eisen didn't feel that that was what was going on, but he- he walked into the CAP office and took out his M-16, and put in tracer bullets, and, uh, emptied the magazine into this lieutenant, who was a former enlisted man, an older man, with grown children, and uh, it was a terrible thing. And the troopers jumped on him, uh, beat him up, and they took him into the uh, brig, uh where the criminals were kept. And so he was charged with murder. Uh, I was appointed as the prosecutor for the case, and we brought in all the- the navy psychiatrists that were available in Japan to give their opinions on mental issues.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And Eisen was at, uh, had an interesting background. Uh, he had raised single, uh, person. His mother was, uh, his family.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, he was a churchgoer. Uh, he was an eagle scout, uh, and he came to Vietnam and went- went off the chart.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And uh, it was later reviewed on appeal, and uh, he was sent home uh, and released from the service.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: But uh, a person with so much to offer, uh, that was sidetracked by a tragedy, uh, but it had nothing to do with whether you were black or white. It was the event.

HUNT: Yes, sir.

GRIFFIS: Uh, you can find other instances of heroics, uh, uh, by blacks as well as anyone else.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, I don't know how else to say it.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: I- I do think that you can see from people that live in our area, they wear the, uh, baseball caps with uh, Vietnam, uh 1968 or have something- something emblazoned on them- uh, where they look back on their service with pride.

HUNT: Mhm. Mhm. That's a great uh, uh, the chapter I believe, where that this story comes from- is the murder at Chu Lai- I believe it's chapter twenty-one, and you ended with an interesting, uh, a word of, uh, seeing them both- in a way, as casualties both uh-

GRIFFIS: Yes.

HUNT: Yeah. [sucks in breath] Um, you see that throughout- you seem to really want to factor in the backgrounds and the contextual information as you were um, uh, participating in these trials.

GRIFFIS: Well, you miss a lot if you- if you don't get the, the broad picture

HUNT: Mhm-hm. Well, speaking of broad pictures, uh [laughs]

GRIFFIS: [laughs]

HUNT: Well, we ha- well, we uh- we're- we're doing good. If you're hopefully, um, not getting too tired.

GRIFFIS: Oh no.

HUNT: These things can be-

GRIFFIS: I'm just fine.

HUNT: Okay. Um, well- well, we're getting towards the- the beginning of the next block of coming home, but we don't want to come home just yet.

GRIFFIS: [laughs]

HUNT: We have a couple of questions here that more uh- just your most vivid memories for example, of your deployment.

GRIFFIS: Well, there's- there's so many.

HUNT: Yes, so I- I hesitate to ask the question [laughs] but...

GRIFFIS: One of them was, I took an R&R in Australia.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: You served a tour in Vietnam, uh, you were given two weeks off-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: During the course of your, uh, service in Vietnam. And people went to Hong Kong, they went to Tokyo, uh-

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: You could tell whatever you- whatever country you choose - uh, a free country. Uh, you'd- they'd send you there, and pay the bill.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, I chose to go to Australia, and I went to Sydney.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And, uh, the people were just enormously supportive, uh, and helpful.



HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, so I was staying in a hotel downtown, and, uh, it was nearing the- almost noon, and I decided I needed to go visit an Australian law firm, uh, so that they- I- I could see how their system operated. Uh, and I went to the receptionist, she said, well sir, it's almost noon and the- all the lawyers are uh, gone to lunch.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And so I sai- I told her I was a Marine here on R&R, and would like to talk to somebody, uh, at the office about their practice. Out comes this older man, uh, uh, who, uh, was very friendly and, uh, he said, come with me and we'll go down to, uh, the lunch room, uh, and have a snack. And uh, we did, and he was so kind, and he said, I- our- our family has family coming in from the outback with their children and we're having a reunion this weekend at our house outside Sydney.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, and it's on a lagoon- just beautiful.

HUNT: Hm

GRIFFIS: Um, he said, we'd like for you to be our guest.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: And boy, that was so kind of them, and so for- I had two days there, and what- we drove- we drove around, uh, uh, the- the area on the bay, uh, went up and saw, uh, caves where highwaymen, criminals back in the seventeen hundreds had gone and hidden their loot, had-

HUNT: Wow [scoffs]

GRIFFIS: -been and driven away. And then when the- when it came time- one memory is just so clear, it's looking down in the water toward the bottom of the lagoon, and you'd think it was just a few inches, but then I saw an octopus swim by.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: A little fella.

HUNT: [chuckles]

GRIFFIS: Uh, and he was twelve feet down.

HUNT: Wow

GRIFFIS: It was just pristine how clear everything was.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, but when it came time for me to go, the family went and took me to the airport, and gave me a sack of food, and, uh, wished me well.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: And, they were so kind- uh, that's a vivid, uh, thought.

HUNT: That's- that seems in stark contrast to when you flew back home at the end of the tour.

[laughs]

GRIFFIS: Oh yeah, that's right.

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

GRIFFIS: And the Australians did support the Americans, uh, uh, during Vietnam. Uh, and they had memories of the Americans coming, and saving Australia and New Zealand from the Japanese-

HUNT: Ah

GRIFFIS: - in World War II. But having these life experiences, I consider these one of the great privileges of my life.

HUNT: Mhm [intake of breath] Um [sighs] a broad question- looking back overall at your service, we've noted many things that you liked. What, um- anything that you didn't like- that you particularly didn't like or particularly did like of your service?

GRIFFIS: Nothing in particular I didn't like...

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, I have to say I- I really enjoyed serving in the Marine Corps.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, uh, had been blessed with a happy life. Uh, uh, but it- serving in the Marine Corps was one of the high points.

HUNT: Mhm [intake of breath] [rustling] You have anything before we get into coming home? Did you want to ask something?

HUNTLEY: Uh- your pace is beautiful- so I'm not going to mess it up [laughs]

HUNT: [laughs]

GRIFFIS: If y'all don't mind, I might refer- let me see it-

HUNT: Sure

GRIFFIS: [pages rustling] There was- without going in and looking for...

HUNTLEY: Yeah, you guys have a good ebb and flow.

HUNT: Good, good, mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, at the end of the book I pointed out, [reading aloud] 'America is now involved in another conflict. This time in Iraq'- and course that's not the case now- 'which is a clash of religions and cultures with roots going back for centuries. Will, our oldest son, has served in Iraq as a Marine 1st Lieutenant. Some things don't change. I've seen in him the same sense of purpose- pride in the men he served with, and the anx- anxiety over the unknown that I felt years ago. I feel fortunate to have spent some key years of my impressionable youth being part of a team much bigger than myself, and risking all for what I believed to be the cause of freedom. I'd do it all again tomorrow.'

HUNT: Beautifully said.

GRIFFIS: Allison, if you have something.

HUNTLEY: Well, um, in thinking about that, you mentioned that your dad was a veteran as well. Do you think that when you were in Vietnam that he would have written the same- like do you think he would have had the same types of reflections about your service in Vietnam? Cause there is sorta of a cyclical nature to it.

GRIFFIS: Well, there is. We - it turned out that we- uh, uh, my brother was a naval academy graduate, and was a- a Marine officer. Uh, and was a- he died in Vietnam on his second tour.

HUNTLEY: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: Uh, the- that's another story, but, uh, uh, the- the fact is that, uh, my brother on his second tour- he was sent over to serve as an advisor to the South Vietnamese Marines. Uh, and left, uh, his wife, uh, at home, uh, pregnant, and uh, I was in- back at Quantico at the time and had a date, and we were going to go to the Ford Theater- I can remember this- uh, in Washington D.C., and I got a phone call. And it was from General, uh, I got my memory caught, uh.

HUNTLEY: [intake of breath]

GRIFFIS: I should know.

HUNT: Fields.

GRIFFIS: Yeah. Okay, General Fields, uh, and he was- he said, Don, you need to call your mother. And uh, I thought- um, it's another harebrained moment, uh, sa- a captain, uh, doesn't call a commanding general of a base and want to shoot the breeze.

HUNT: [laughs]

HUNTLEY: [laughs]

GRIFFIS: And uh, but his voice was so calm uh, and kind. And he just- he didn't say anything about what- about Bill yet, he just said you need to call home. And when I did, Mother answered the phone and said, Bill's been killed [voice cracks] [sobs] I'm sorry.

HUNT: Don't be sorry

GRIFFIS: But he was- he was killed on the day his child was born.

HUNT: Oh wow

HUNTLEY: Yeah, that's a lot.

GRIFFIS: And...At any rate, that's part of the tapestry of life. They raised two fine daughters, and [pause] all of it seems still to have a, a broad purpose.

HUNT: Mhm-hm

GRIFFIS: And you- I'm aware how much strongly, uh, religion is important [voice breaks] Uh, it brings out the best in us as opposed to the worst.

HUNT: Mhm [intake of breath] They were very lucky to get you back home.

GRIFFIS: Well, I- yes, and needing to step in then, and take on the role of being the parent.

HUNT: Were they loc- were they in San Angelo as well?

GRIFFIS: Yes, uh, his wife was a girl from Ozona, a ranching family.

HUNT: Mhm

GRIFFIS: Uh, but we came through it.

HUNT: Mhm- hm. Well, um [sigh], this has been- this has been great, and uh, very- very- very touching, very enlightening. Is there- is there anything else that maybe, um, we would like to add



looking back in terms of uh, integrating back into the community? I think we've covered the essence of it.

GRIFFIS: I think you've done a good job.

HUNT: Okay, okay, excellent. So uh, we'll bring this to a conclusion then. We're right on time, right about the hour mark. Uh-

GRIFFIS: Can't beat that.

[All laugh]

HUNT: Okay, thank you very much.

[End of Transcript]