Deborah and Lance Larson – Life During the Vietnam Conflict

By Deborah and Lance Larson

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Oral Interview conducted by Marisa Larson

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
ML: Please state your name and where you were born.

DL: I’m Deborah Larson and I was born in Butte, Montana.

LL: My name is Lance Larson and I was born in Dillon, Montana.

ML: How old were you when you first became really aware of the situation going on in Vietnam?

DL: Oh, let me see. We kind of knew a little bit when I was in grade school but that was, you know…more in junior high when I was really starting noticing things because that was when they started talking to, you know, us about it in school. Jeez, what age would that be? Junior high age?

ML: So what was the sentiment towards the war at that time that you noticed?

DL: Well it just seemed to be that you’d hear, especially from colleges and stuff, about all these different protests and stuff. Well we weren’t exactly here in Montana, it wasn’t that, you know, showing so that you could notice it that much unless you took interest in the news.

LL: Ah, when I first heard about it was on, let’s see, I was probably around eight, nine years old. My brother was in the United States Navy on the U.S.S. Ticonderoga in Vietnam. Ah, we saw most of it, I saw most of it on T.V. The protests and the Vietnam War on the television on the news. Like here, in Dillon, Montana it’s mostly a cowboy town and back then we, they, didn’t really appreciate long-haired hippies, there. We were mostly short-haired, and there was always a conflict in a town like Dillon.

ML: So which brother was it that went to Vietnam?

LL: Norman Proctor, my half-brother.

DL: Well, I had a half-brother there too. He was there before it was actually, well, he was there before it got really intense, so…he was there enough but it wasn’t really terrible yet. Yeah, he was a medic with the Navy so he kind of helped the wounded and stuff. That was John Maybee.

LL: And Norman, like I said, he was on the U.S.S. Ticonderoga. He was in, communications on a flat-top. Aircraft carrier.

ML: So how did you stay in touch with them? Did you write letters?

LL: I didn’t. He came home a couple of times on leave and so, he pretty much came home and then he went back on the ship, and stuff. He got back in, I believe, back in 1970…just at the end of Vietnam, I think it was ’72 or ’73 when he returned. When he got out of the Navy.
ML: So, how did you families cope with having your brothers at war?

LL: Mmm, not much. They’d just, they’d just write him letters, he wrote home and my mother wrote back to him, and stuff. He spent some time up in, up at Kodiak Island up in Alaska. That was where his basic training was before he went on to the aircraft carrier. We pretty much just watched the news and, see what was happening on the news.

DL: Oh yeah, that reminds me; on my brother, you know how Bob Hope used to go over there? To entertain the troops? Well, we happened to see my brother sitting on top of one of the ambulances watching the show. My parents were pretty excited to be able to see that.

ML: Were you really worried about your family members being over there?

DL: You know, I wasn’t really that concerned because, you know, I was kind of out of it. I think a lot of it was because my brother had already been away before and had already been in the Navy before he was into knowing everybody. He was gone before I was really old enough to really notice.

ML: He was one of your older brothers wasn’t he?

DL: Yeah, he was one of the older brothers in the first part of the family, you know half-brother and all of that, so I didn’t really have that big of a connection. So I wasn’t really that worried. But it was kind of thrilling to say, “Hey, we saw him on T.V.!”

LL: Yeah, and Norman, he was on the aircraft carrier, communications, and he was pretty much out to sea so we weren’t too worried about him being in danger. The only ones we were worried about were the people who were on, who were in Vietnam, there, theirselves (sic). On the land itself.

DL: Yeah, well John was on the land. But, like I said, it was before it had gotten really intense over there. There was fighting, but, but it, it wasn’t at the worst part. He kind of got out before the worst part of that started to really get intense so he didn’t really get into it a lot.

LL: I have other friends who were helicopter, ah, he’s a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and a medic, the other was a medic. Who I happened to meet when I was in the National Guard. He’s, he doesn’t talk much about Vietnam, it still probably bothers him after all these years.

ML: How was the situation in your hometowns concerning the war? Support? Demonstrating?

DL: Hmm, well hometown you know, it’s pretty much like it is now. It’s pretty far back from reactionaries you know. You didn’t really see big protests one way or the other; really strong for or against. I never really noticed that kind of thing. I think the most we
ever heard or talked was when we were in school once I got up into the higher grades and still it was more concern about how to get out without…they really didn’t care one way or the other whether we’d win or lose.

LL: In Dillon there was more support. Just like in Butte, but we were probably more supportive. There was no protests.

ML: How did you feel about those who resisted the draft?

DL: Well, truthfully I thought they were cowards.

LL: The same.

DL: Yeah, I still have that feeling. You know, it’s like, even if you didn’t, you didn’t believe in it you should believe in what is right that seemed to be…the country was asking for help and no one was giving it to them.

LL: The same. I feel the same way, they should have went instead of going to Canada.

ML: You were in school when the war was winding down but were you ever nervous about being drafted?

DL: Duane and Joe were about that age group. It kind of worried them a little bit. But I don’t think it was something that they were ever super scared of. They, of course, were lucky and never did get picked in the draft part, but there was a little concern there. It was, you know, getting towards the winding-down scenes. About when I graduated was about when it got over so…Duane and Joe had already been out for a little while so they, you know, went to college and that seemed like that…using anything to get deferred as much as they could.

LL: And my brother Norman was one but I had one younger brother who graduated a couple of years later named Clyde. And he graduated a couple years after the Vietnam War so we weren’t really about going to Vietnam.

DL: Yeah, I remember that Bill had just gotten married and he had been in the Marines originally, and that usually gives them a call-back in case a war comes out. But just, it was like a month, his reenactment, came before they really started getting intense about getting people back in so he didn’t really have to go back, into the service or anything. He was really thankful because he just had a brand new wife and family and all that stuff so he was thankful that way. That was Bill Maybee.

ML: What were your feelings about the purposes of the war?

DL: You know, that one was kind of very strange. You weren’t really sure, you know they say all these things like to stop communism and all that and all. But when you look back on it you couldn’t see the purpose…it wasn’t doing any, any stopping or, you know.
It was, they just kind of lamely handled the way it was done. You kind of can blame Presidents, I’m assuming, on that.

LL: For myself, I didn’t know too much. All I knew was that we were trying to help the South Vietnamese people fight against Communists and the, but the bureaucratic government kind of dampered [sic] the, South Vietnam and they quit trying to help the people. Then they pulled troops out of there and let North Vietnam invade South Vietnam until the, the fall of Saigon.

DL: It kind of reminds me of when, you know, you think back in history when the British...how they were still using the same kind of combat against the Americans yet the Americans were using the kind the Native Americans were using, you know, like behind trees and things like that. And we get to Vietnam and the Americans just didn’t learn. They were doing the old world style and we were trying to do that kind of style that was being fought there. The kind of land base that they had. You know their ground, if they won ground, it seemed like they didn’t have it anymore. It was just, it was really strange. Partially it was because they didn’t learn from history. They didn’t try to re-stylize themselves how to fight on that kind [of] combat in that of terrain and jungle and that.

ML: So, when did you first notice that the American people realized that the war wasn’t going as well as the Presidents had claimed previously?

DL: Good question. I think a lot of that was because I started paying more attention because we were talking about it more and in junior high and high school, especially in high school. Of course that was getting towards the end when the war was winding down and all that. You know, you just kind of noticed that things weren’t going as well as they should have been. Yeah, it’s just that kind of thing.

LL: The same, after we started to pull back and we kept adding more troops and more troops and we started losing more troops and the Administration was putting too much effort into the war and we quit bombing, key points. I think that is when we started losing the war.

ML: You mentioned that you started learning more about the war in school. How was that? Were they more for or against the war?

DL: Well, gee, you know that is funny. There were teachers that were definitely for the U.S. but they were, things weren’t going as they should be. They just tried to describe and talk about how some of the people there in the countries themselves that we were supposed to be trying to free didn’t really seem to care if they were having communists or whoever in charge of them ‘cause they were having a hard life no matter what. So that was some of the things we discussed. I guess in a way it sounded more like they were for getting out than out and getting away. But like I said, that was getting more towards w[here] the people at the time was…let’s just end this thing somehow. Let’s just get out of there. That was pretty much how the teachers handled it too.
LL: Yeah, my teachers were...there were some that were for, most of them were for, and a few that were against it but they pretty much didn’t...tell the students too much what they felt. I think that was a pretty good thing too.

DL: I think when you’re younger you are pretty isolated from those types of things. It doesn’t really hit you that this stuff is real and that people are really getting killed and that kind of stuff like when we got a little older and we understood things a little more. That’s probably why we started to pay a little more attention to what was going on.

ML: So, was communism ever a big scare in your area when you were growing up?

DL: Well yeah when we were younger it definitely was. They had all these weird little trials...I mean people in Hollywood for cryin’...it was just ridiculous on some of it. There was a great fear of communists. Like it was going to take over everyone, everywhere. It was *the* evil thing. Yeah, there was a lot of fear of communism.

LL: Yeah, pretty much. The only thing that I remember was when Jane Fonda went over to Vietnam. They called her Hanoi Hannah or Hanoi Jane, they used to call her. And she felt sorry for the...that the war was [unintelligible] and that kind of upset the United States and I think that she hasn’t lived that down ever since.

DL: Too true.

ML: You mentioned further back that you learned about the war a lot from the media. Looking back now how do you think the media handled it?

DL: Back then I think they handled things a little more fairly than they do now. There were more reporters rather than trying to make you believe what they thought you should believe. Of course there were always those programs that had their own opinions but the actual news casts, I think they handled it pretty good. They’d show one and then they’d show the other but they never really opinionated saying that, you know this is horrible and it should end. I never really noticed stuff like that, at least from here.

LL: Yeah, I think it was pretty much fair[er] at that time than it is now also.

ML: Where about in school were you when Nixon was elected?

DL: Let me see. I’m trying to remember the first time, second time! The first time I was in junior high and the second time was just before, yeah, I was in high school. Of course the war ended pretty much the year I graduated. I mean it definitely ended then pretty much. Nixon did make the promise and he did what he said he was going to do. I don’t know if it was the best route on getting people out. Then again, I don’t know if there was a good way to get out of that war. Like I said, I don’t think any of the presidents before had a right way of doing it. They were doing what they had to and that was probably pretty much it.
LL: Yeah, Johnson kind of messed it up when he was in. He kept…

DL: I kind of think Kennedy might have handled it differently. Well, of course that would just be guessing so who knows.

LL: Yeah, when Johnson was in he kind of messed it up big time. With him the war was just going to go on and if it wasn’t for Nixon. Nixon was the one that pulled our troops out of Vietnam in the end and started getting our boys home.

DL: Yeah, because originally it was only supposed to be a police action. It was never supposed to be declared as a war so go fig. All those lives lost for a “police” action; doesn’t that sound nice and clean?

ML: What was the general view of having Nixon before Watergate?

DL: Well, he was elected a second time. Because he actually did show…it did look like he was getting the troops out of Watergate. At that time he was pretty popular. Yeah, pre…

LL: Kennedy was pretty good. He was for civil rights and stuff. And then Johnson, then Kennedy was assissined [sic], then Johnson took over and Johnson really messed up the country. Then Nixon…

DL: Johnson was re-elected too.

LL: Yeah, Nixon finally beat him out, actually he finally helped us overcome this Vietnam War by pulling our troops out.

DL: So he pretty much did what he promised and campaigned even though that is kind of hard to believe.

ML: What was your reaction when you did find out about Nixon and the Watergate Scandal?

DL: Yeah, that was something. The more you heard the more you went, ‘holy cow, he did all that kind of stuff!!’ And it was kind of ridiculous. I don’t think it was really necessary. I think he would have taken the election on his own without all the underhandedness that the people did. He, himself, included.

LL: Yeah, when I heard about Watergate I couldn’t believe that they accused him of taping. And then they forced him out of office.

ML: Do you remember where you were when you found out?

LL: Yeah, I was in school when that happened. We didn’t go too much into it. In a small community like ours we kind of just do our own thing. Most of the time we just quit
watching it because the media kept playing it over and over again. We just started to do something else.

DL: Yeah, it was pretty sensational at the time. I think I was at home at the time. I don’t remember exactly where. It wasn’t that big of a thing to me I guess! Though I do remember when he resigned and then he walked over the lawn to the helicopter and then he leaves and then they swear in the Vice-President. Which was of course the first Vice-President that hadn’t been elected, into being the President. So it was kind of unique. Kind of historical, that’s for sure. So you knew some ‘big’ thing was happening because that was the first time any President had resigned in office and left the presidency.

ML: Did you notice disillusionment with the Presidency after that?

DL: At the time there were, yeah, pretty much. If it could happen at this place, what about the smaller offices? And it made people… it shook them up for awhile there. I don’t know if some people ever got over it. You know, no more trust. It didn’t help any… of course it made people watch more closely and then, of course, they had to watch themselves more closely too. I guess in a way that helped.

ML: So, what were your reactions when they finally declared their final “peace” settlements?

DL: Well, it was kind of a relief. I remember them showing when they were taking that last few people out it was almost like, they weren’t leaving with a sense of not being free and that if they didn’t get out they’d be captured or killed or held prisoner. It was really a frantic withdrawal; the last group of people that had to leave. You would see them taking these people off of the rooftops and flying them out in the helicopters and that. From what I understand some didn’t make it there because they ran out of gas or didn’t have anywhere to land. It was kind of weird.

LL: Yeah, when they finally did take them out of Saigon by helicopters, they took a lot of people out and put them on aircraft carriers. They had so many people on the aircraft carriers that they had to literally take the helicopters and shove them off the deck to make room for all the people that they had onboard.

DL: And that didn’t include any of the people that where just inside regular small boats that tried to escape too. So it was kind of, almost a riot in a way. It just seemed like the enemy was coming and they had to leave and they didn’t have time to get out of there. It wasn’t really a nice, easy withdrawal for the people, for those who were a part of the government, and those and the South Vietnamese seemed in fear for their lives, a lot of them. Especially the ones that helped the French and the U.S. troops that were there.

ML: So what was the atmosphere like after that when you went to college? Was there more feelings against the government?
DL: You know, here in Montana it’s still that way. You’re a little more willing to forget some of the things that go on somewhere else. You’re still a little more American, you still believe in your country still. That’s the way I felt here at Western [Montana College], like Lance said, it’s a small town. You just had a feeling that everybody was pro-American. They didn’t really dis the government or… question that a lot.

ML: Did you notice any long lasting effects from the situation in Vietnam?

DL: In some senses. It seemed like at the very end they were really trying to make up for all the bad stuff they’d said. A lot of the last few ones came back really being made heroes, especially the ones who were prisoners of war and all that. The ones that we know came home that if[s]. There was always questions on…that there were probably people still there. But I kind of doubt that but…there were always those who said ‘you know there are still people over there and they don’t even know the war is over.’

LL: Yeah, especially with the ones who came home before the war was over. They were called “baby killers” and they…people, they younger generation hated them and protested against them and spit on them. But when the war was over, the POWs that came home, they made them heroes, like Debbie said.

DL: Since it's been so long it’s almost like some of these…especially those who had difficulties after from different problems like from being in the war or something or… what was called Agent Orange. It’s taken a long time for the government to give out benefits to some of these soldiers, I think some are probably still waiting for, you know, medical or mental problems because of this war. You know, the government just needs to work a little harder for them but they’re not too good at that.

ML: So did you know anybody who came back from the war?

DL: You mean besides our brothers?

ML: Yeah. Well, your brothers included. How were they affected, or did you notice?

DL: I didn’t really notice. Like I said, my brother lived over in California so we didn’t really see him a whole lot. Still don’t for that matter!

LL: I have a, well, I have one friend, two friends actually; one I work with, he was the helicopter pilot. He talks about it quite often, he tells stories. But the other one I was with in the National Guard. He’s all messed up. He mostly, he drinks a lot and he’s unshaved, unclean. I think he still…still hasn’t got the help that he needed to help him get over the Vietnam War.

DL: I think that on some things…it was funny because when I was a librarian about in ’80, ’81, we were trying to get some historical books on Vietnam and they were almost non-existent then. I mean, here it is almost eight years later! Nowadays you already have
books out on the Iraq War that is going on now. I mean, it’s just kind of crazy that way. It was like “we don’t want to hear about it, we don’t want to write about that war.” Finally they did. It was just weird, I mean, here it was eight, nine years later and they still hadn’t written much about it, you know, so it was really hard to find anything historical about it.

ML: When did you start noticing histories written about it?

DL: It didn’t seem like it was very long after, looking for those books, maybe two years later. About ten years after the war was actually over before they began getting really good, actual historical books rather than just the anti-this-or-that. You’d hear a little about the war but nothing that really seemed to have…substance…until about ten years later. So, it took a while!

ML: Why do you think it took so long?

DL: Well, you know, I sometimes think it’s the sentiments. Some, I think, didn’t want to have thinking they were pro-war or proAnything or maybe they didn’t want to get anyone mad at them for writing about the truth about some of the things that really went on over there since there was some bad stuff too, of course, that the U.S. committed. But it worked more than one way. I think maybe that’s part of the reason they were probably reluctant to publish things.

ML: Well, that pretty much exhausts the list of questions I had for you so I guess we can end there. Thank you so much for letting me interview you.

DL: Yeah, no problem.

LL: You’re welcome.

DL: I hope we helped. You did jar some memories there for us.