

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

# Gregory Palmer – Life during Vietnam

By Gregory Palmer

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Oral Interview conducted by Cale Allen

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

CA: We're here with Bro. Gregory Palmer; he's a teacher of religion at Brigham Young University-Idaho, Rexburg Idaho. We're here on the campus to get some of your thoughts Bro. Palmer on the Vietnam War, and how it affected you. Where were you born?

GP: Born in Rexburg Idaho.

CA: How old were you on Aug. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1964?

GP: I was almost nine years old.

CA: Almost nine yours old, so you were eight years old?

GP: Yes.

CA: What was the first thing you heard about the War?

GP: You know I was young; it was just kind of always there, you know you grow up in it. I can't really remember anything specific. It was on the news every night, we were kids so we didn't watch the news every night, just kind of always knew it was there. The first time it came into consciousness was all the protest. That was the first time I became aware of that, probably approaching my teens, and that was when you became aware.

CA: So you remember the Protest?

GP: Yes.

CA: How did the protest make you feel? Did you have any specific feelings toward that?

GP: You know I was young, and I think you lean, especially when you're younger, towards the politics of your parents, and you know my dad especially, he was a veteran and pro government; it made things seem unsettled. It made things seem kind of uncertain, and kind of unsettled, and kind of, messy is the word that comes to mind, you know because the protesters were hippies, and so everything kind of confused, and unraveling, especially as a young kid, that's how I remember feeling.

VA: And so at that young age you didn't really understand a lot of it?

GP: No.

CA: How did others your age feel about the war? Did your friends ever talk about it?

GP: Not 'til I was older.

VA: What were the attitudes of the adults around you during the war? Do you remember that specifically?

GP: Most of the adults that I was around, were, would have been more conservative, would have been more pro-government and anti-protester. Now that changed kind of in the latter part of the war, I remember kind of change, even in some of the conservative people, saying, "Let's just get out," but the people I was around would have leaned more conservative.

CA: Okay, so they necessarily weren't pro-war, but they trusted the government?

GP: Yeah, and maybe it was less trusted the government; it was the nature of the protesters. Sometimes it made people feel uncomfortable; you know you've got kind of the order of the government, opposed to this chaos, and Hippies. I think that's kind of, people were more comfortable with, a little more orderly than the rabble.

VA: People were a little more sure of what they were doing?

GP: Right, Right.

CA: Were there times during the war you were scared? At that young age did it ever scare you?

GP: No, the only thing I guess close to fear I ever remember feeling was, say relatives or friends maybe that had low draft numbers, and they could get called up, and you know, fear for individuals. For people from the community you knew, could get called up. This was when I was younger. Then when you're in high school you had to register, for the draft, and you nervous because you got a number, and that's kind of how likely you would be drafted.

CA: So the war was still going on when you had to register?

GP: Yeah. Now I think it was deactivated by the time I would have been drafted. I was in the middle you know, but I was kind of nervous about that, where your number was going to be, and how likely it might be that you face the draft.

CA: Did you have any friends that got drafted?

GP: No. By this time, by the time I was a senior it was kind of winding down and so, no I didn't.

CA: What was your opinion of the Vietnamese people during the war?

GP: You know it's interesting now, looking back on this, that I probably did not understand well as a kid, so I'm trying to the filter of what I know now, trying to kind of transfer that, so it might be affecting a little. You know you heard all these things about villages booby-trapping their babies, and snipers and things like that, so there was, you know I think the idea was we're sending soldiers over there trying to do a good thing, you

know, trying to stop communism and promote freedom. Look at the danger our troops are facing there, so there was, funny feelings. At least confused, or, unclear, confused.

CA: Indecisive?

GP: Yeah, indecisive, paradoxical. And again I haven't thought about this for thirty years. If I could identify what I was thinking then, that would be the closest to it.

CA: What is your opinion now, of the Vietnamese People?

GP: You know its interesting now because, I'm a member of the church (Church of Jesus Christ of latter-day Saints), you kind of have a different worldview. There's a feeling of brotherhood, you know, you know people who go back and there's kind of been some healing, some amends made. I mean, there would be nothing negative.

CA: Have you ever had any prolonged contact with Vietnamese, or oriental people?

GP: I have with Asians, with Laotians, some with Cambodians, but a lot of Laotians. Not specifically Vietnamese.

CA: How did the war affect the community?

GP: You know it was here, which is small, and fairly conservative, and so the community itself was, you know, its kind of how world events are, big things happen and you go on living your life, you go to the corner store, you go about living your work, you kind of go about doing things, but especially the protests, that kind of created a, there was climate kind of.

CA: Were there protest here in Rexburg?

GP: No, there wasn't but, you know the protesters got so much attention, and media attention, I hope I'm not digressing too much but, the whole climate from the 60s, you know I was a young kid, I was a *Leave it to Beaver* kid, I was a squeaky clean, you know all of us were squeaky clean 50s kids, you know, and then all of a sudden it was very confusing, kind of like after the Kennedy assassination and then into this era of protest, everything was kind of confusing, everything was kind of coming apart, it just felt kind of wild, and then the interesting thing that happened is it was, well I don't even know if its right to say it was well marketed, but you know, kind of the counter culture, it's kind of clique now, but it was the hippie culture. It was very, very popular, like now, you can wear your haircut how you want to, you can wear your hair long if you want to and nobody says too much, you can shave it, and anything in between. You had to have long hair then. It just became, there was a very predominate youth culture, you had to have long hair, and you wore army fatigues, and just a culture really took over, and kind of to be cool, you had to be, you know there was a lot of the current, the cultural current was to kind of carry you, you know it was cool to be a hippie, especially young people kind of got swept up in that. So therefore it was cool to be anti-war, so though Rexburg itself

wasn't probably affected too much, the whole country was because there was this kind of current, and the confusion, the dissidents that it made and the scene change and culture that it made.

CA: How did you as an individual contribute in the community to the war effort?

GP: Oh, I didn't.

CA: Not at all?

GP: I was a kid going to high school, figuring it out.

CA: I remember during the first Persian Gulf war there were yellow ribbons and things like that hung up, were there things like that?

GP: No, nothing like that actually. Now what you'll hear a lot about the Vietnam war is people coming back from the war, soldiers returning from the war getting spit on and called baby killers and stuff, now you hear that a lot. Now that would have probably been more urban areas where the protesters were more militant, and more vocal, you know local basis here they'd be welcomed home and all is great, but this was such a long war. So there wasn't the kind of intensity with the Persian Gulf, or even the Iraq war, and doing that, it was just so long and just kind of draining on your national spirit. There would be individual celebrations but nothing like that. All you ever really heard about were the protest.

CA: Did the war in any way affect your family life?

GP: No not really, other than some discussions around the table. Dad or something was mad at the news, I remember that, even extended family for one reason or another there were deferments or something like that, so I didn't really have anyone really close serve, so no not very dramatically.

CA: And what do you mean by deferments?

GP: Well there were different deferments you could get, there were educational deferments, and some missionary deferments, not very many, but some missionary deferments, and some things like that, and so anybody, I'm the youngest grandchild, I had uncles, I didn't really have cousins that were affected, I had uncles who got deferments, so even very directly in my family got affected very much

CA: Did you know any young men who did not return from the war?

GP: No, not personally.

CA: Did you know of?

GP I did, yeah.

CA: And were they from here in Rexburg?

GP: From the area, I don't think anybody from Rexburg exactly, but from the valley, you know the Idaho Falls to St. Anthony valley.

CA: How did their families' cope with that, do you know?

GP: I don't know.

CA: How did the community cope with that? Was there any type of sad spirit that would...?

GP: Yeah, Yeah, it was most of all, as I recall, and it was limited, and as I recall it was mainly support for the family, and kind of praising them as heroes, in the line of their duty, and that kind of thing.

CA: And this area being predominately LDS, did that have anything to do with that type of thing?

GP: Yeah, it did, because LDS people tend to be, especially in the area, tend to be a little more conservative, a little more, they would consider it to be patriotic to support what the government is doing to stop communism, you can see how the church would go along with that, the church was putting down some wonderful roots in Asia then, you've got great growth in the Philippines then, you've got great growth in other parts of Asia, so you know communism could interfere with that, so definitely I think the church worldview affected how you viewed the war.

CA: We already spoke about this, but just real quick, did you have a father or brother who served in the military during the war?

GP: No.

CA: But you mentioned you father had served in the military?

GP: He was kind of the very end of Korea, he wasn't in Korea but was in the military at the very end of the Korean war.

CA: And was he enlisted, or did he get drafted?

GP: He, lets see, I don't remember. He enlisted, he enlisted.

CA: So by the time Vietnam broke out he was well out of it?

GP: Yeah, right, he had children then and had done his tour.

CA: According to your understanding at that time what were America's goals in the war?

GP: I think what I stated, according to my understanding, it was the stop of communism, there was great effort, push by China, supported and funded by China to topple regimes and have communism, so it was to keep communism a bay.

CA: That was the main goal of the war?

GP: Yeah.

CA: How were returning veterans treated after the war, and I know you already mentioned something about this.

GP: In this area, I think they were received well, and honorably. You know the understanding is, and you get publicity about some returning to criticism.

CA: How did you view returning veterans?

GP: I'm from this small community, and so didn't know that many, I, to tell you honestly, being an older teenager, being younger I don't remember that well, kind of admiration I what I can basically remember being young. When I was older there was kind of this talk, from older friends about their friends would come back from Vietnam, because it was such a difficult war, they talk about that, in World War II you'd see so many days of combat, you were always in jeopardy in Vietnam, there was so much combat in Vietnam, there was a lot of trauma, so you kind of heard about veterans coming back affected, you know with some traumatic disorders and things. I remember, as a slightly older teenager, being a little bit wary of veterans, just thinking, you know what have they been through, and even a little bit of wariness being there about just how the war had affected them.

CA: Do you think people's opinions about veterans have changed over the years, or do you think it's fairly the same?

GP: Towards specifically Vietnam veterans, or all veterans?

CA: Specifically Vietnam.

GP: I know mine have just because I've met some Vietnam veterans who are such great people, and it was a very traumatic thing, you know you're almost nervous someone's going to go nuts on you, you know that how these guys had kind of made me believe. My opinion has changed. I still think this was a terrible war, and a lot of terrible affects from that war. So you look at a Vietnam veteran a little bit different than you would a World War II, Korea, and now Iraq, because that was such a tough war, just so difficult on people. There's a little bit, it's a slightly different feeling. Not like more respect, but

more, your heart kind of goes out to them, those veterans a little bit more, if that makes sense.

CA: Maybe feel a little more sympathy for what they went through?

GP: Yeah, I think so.

CA: Now that you're older and have a better understanding of the war, how do you feel about?

GP: I, you know it was a devastating thing for the country, it really tore people apart. I don't know, how we revise history looking back on it, you can sit back on it and say it was a mistake to ever do that, but I don't know if you could ever really do anything different, you know with I think with the information people had at the time, leaders thought that they were doing the right thing. A lot of people look back and say it was a mistake and we never should have been there and maybe that's the case, but I think you have to call it, armchair, looking back thirty or forty years.

CA: Now, do you feel the reasons for going to war were noble ones, personally?

GP: If those were really the reasons, if they were to stop communism, to keep people from going into communism, yeah.

CA: And do you think the 60,000 plus American lives lost were...?

GP: I think, again this is revisionist. Because you got to look at the times. You look back this from the vantage point of history, I think the aims were probably noble, some mistakes were made, and knowing now what would happen, we should have pulled out.

CA: So we should have pulled out?

GP: Yeah.

CA: Well that's all the questions I have. You've been a great help, thank you so much.

GP: I don't know how much this has helped Cale, I hope it's helpful.