Jim and Sherri Cassity on the Vietnam War

By Jim and Sherri Cassity

October 2, 2004

Box 6 Folder 7

Oral Interview conducted by Christine Schramm

Transcript copied by Devon Robb February 2006

Brigham Young University – Idaho
CS: To start out with, how old were the both of you when the Vietnam War broke out?

SC: I can’t remember.

CS: Teenagers?

JC: No, I lived, uh, learned that when the barges were going, the unstoppable, about eight or nine, but when, when Johnson started ordering the troops, that was about 1965 almost when it started escalating, so I was about 12.

SC: 11 or 12 then.

CS: Ok, and according to your understanding, what were America’s goals in the war?

SC: Well we’d hear about the fear of communism creeping in throughout the world, and I know that that kind of was a fear for a lot of us because we had heard of the horrors of Communism.

JC: Yeah, it was called the red menace, and the idea was that you had two large powers that at that time the Soviet Union and Red China, it was called, and the idea was that communism was info-trading the southeast Asia area and Vietnam was a hot area. France had been fighting over there and had given up. I guess its whole scheme in, was leading it in a revolutionary and the north wanted to essentially take over this south country and start off, boy there were everywhere a lot of terrible things going on over there and problems, the idea was we were to stop communism.

CS: So what were your feelings about this? Were they positive, for going over there and hearing about it? Did you feel like it was the right thing to do? Or did you disagree?

JC: My feelings changed over a period of years because we were over there for so long, and ’65 through ’70. We’d hear about it initially, and it was brought out that this was an idea to spread freedom and to preserve democracy. So initially I think most people were positive towards the war, but what started happening was that so many young men had been and were being killed. And there didn’t seem to be any end in sight, there didn’t seem to be any…

SC: Progress as it seemed.

JC: Exactly, any ending insight. There wasn’t what they talk about in Today’s war with Iraq and Afghanistan; they didn’t have any exit strategy. So what would happen was that our feelings were initially very patriotic towards and in supporting the government, but as time went on, we began to be hearing so many discorpt[inaudible] that we began questioning why are we there, what are we doing there, and then we began to see that in a part of politics we need to get out of Vietnam and I can remember the 1968 election Nixon was elected in part with the promise of “I have an exit strategy for Vietnam, we
will win and return with honor.” So all we did then, there wasn’t much honor we could return with.

CS: Then, what were your feelings about the drafting process?

JC: It was something that was just there.

SC: It had all the guys nervous. A lot of girls just thought boy, we’re glad we’re not guys, but that would be a hard thing. You’d just wait in anticipation as to if your number would come up.

JC: I had an older brother whose number did come up and he would have gone to Vietnam, but he looked for an opportunity to avoid that service and join the reserves. But his number was extra; he would have gone the [inaudible]. I, on the other hand, my number in the draft came up, and it was something like 330, so I didn’t have to worry about the draft, but I knew a lot of young men who did have to go. And growing up in my neighborhood, there were families that had to deal with that.

CS: Were they, do you know what their feelings were, when they found out they were drafted?

JC: I… really scared.

CS: (Directed towards Sherri) Did you know anyone who was?

SC: I wasn’t real close with anyone that got drafted. I think that one young man in our war, he wanted to go on a mission, but I think at that time they had a limit, maybe it was because of funding, that his family didn’t have needs, and the ward just didn’t have the funds to help and so he was not able to serve a mission, and I know he was really sad and he had to go, but thereafter, he was really bitter about that situation. But as far as knowing someone personally, no, but I know of the boys my age, I think that their numbers were very low along, maybe not quite to 300, but they were farther along the path. There weren’t too concerned about them coming up.

JC: The war changed a lot of men and many felt inadequate. I’m almost ashamed to say that, but two men I know who went over there, one was serving over there, and he encountered a tremendous amount of death and dying. And another had similar experiences; both were very different, very different. Whereas they were both happy, go-lucky, they came home very solemn. Much affected by what happened.

CS: And were they treated any differently when they returned?

JC: The ones that I remember coming home, when they were coming home early in the war, were treated well, those who came home later, they were treated very, very cruel. There were…
SC: It was because of the rumors that in other things, you know, in particular things that happened that we had heard about, eventually, I think were the blame of those kinds of things, were put on a lot of the soldiers who had nothing to do with horrible things.

JC: It started really going downhill with the My Lai Massacre. In that regard, because that then was televised, that, a lot of that was televised of what had gone on. Hefley Bailey, you probably remember him for representing O.J. Simpson, and he represented kind of a shepherd who was the inspirational story who was a very popular front streamer and he represented the [inaudible] when a lot came out of what had happened at My Lai. And then lots of incorporated to the soldier combat and soldier’s worth [inaudible] at the My Lai Massacre.

CS: So, you said how they were treated, did people just talk to them on the street, or look down on them?

JC: Coming home, there were a lot of anti-war activists here, we didn’t see too much of it in Utah, but there was a lot of it on the East, where a lot of these soldiers would be coming home and the activists would be out there. It was terrible.

SC: Like California?

JC: The activists were people who, who were dodging the draft, who were into drugs, [inaudible] where they’d call people horrible names, it was terrible. It was terrible for those soldiers. There was resentment. There was resentment for the soldiers who deserved it a whole lot better than they had it.

CS: Well then, what do you think of those who resisted the draft? You said that some did it for mission, or education, were there other…?

JC: Well what I think is that those who resisted the draft, those who… you have to put them in different categories. Those who went out went off to Canada, President Carter signed an amnesty to those who had run off, I think they were cowards. I think they were cowards. Because you could be a, you could resist the war on religious terms, or other terms, and have alternate things, instead of going into service you could serve in other parts of duty, and I know one man who did. He sincerely believed that he shouldn’t have to go to war. But those who resisted and stayed or burned their draft cards, or did things like that and then try to avoid it, I think they were cowards. I didn’t have any respect for them. The men who went, the men who did their duty, they were the heroes. These other people were, they just didn’t want to go to war and that’s fine, it’s just some kind of conscientious subjector, and do something else for the government. That was possible. Those who stayed and went to trial for resisting, great, they stayed, and they stood up for what they believed. The cowards who ran, I’ll never respect them.

CS: (towards Sherri) What are your feelings?
SC: I feel much the same way. I could understand, you know, not wanting to go to war because you would hear of the horrors of the World Wars, and the Civil War, Revolutionary War, so you could understand someone’s feelings for not wanting to go to war, which though those feelings are selfish, it’s a frightening thing to have to imagine. And so you can understand people feeling that way. But you can also look on the other hand and know that fighting for democracy and that we don’t want Communism here, and that we want to push it back, I think they, you know if, I think it’s a hard thing to think about.

JC: As you look back on it, as I look back on it, my name went into that hat. If I had been drafted I would have gone, because that was the thing to do. Either after all the college, or missions, or whatever else, nobody, when I say cowards, I don’t blame anybody for getting a deferment or going on a mission, because that was fine, they were with a deferment. What I mean is these men and women who chose to chase across the border, and ran away, and became criminals. Now, that’s not to say the draft was fair, because the draft wasn’t fair. It did not give people a deferment in everything else. And so most of the people who went to Vietnam were the poor ignorant slobs, and that’s the reason that was another problem that was involved. The majority of the men who were killed or went over there couldn’t qualify for a lot of the deferments. So, the fact that something isn’t fair doesn’t mean you can run away from it. But there were a lot of problems, and the fact of it is unfairness. That fact is what caused the change in the army to be involved and professionalized. And that happened in the right setting.

CS: You mentioned earlier something about anti-war sentiment, did that affect your feelings towards the war at all?

JC: Yes. What about you?

SC: Umm, it did some. I would get really upset because they were really quite brutal and crude about it. What was shown on television was typically what you would see back in San Francisco. With the hippies, and the peace-not-war men. And they quite frankly were disgusting to me.

CS: What kinds of things did they do?

SC: Oh, they spit, they spit upon people, they burned flags, they just were rude.

JC: The type of thing you see in the Arab and Serbian dealings that the public relations were happening [inaudible] those are the kinds of things that were going on in America. Now you see there was something that was complicating the issue of the war, and the activists with what was going on. And at that time the civil rights movement was going on very hot and very heavy back then. And we had a lot, strangely enough, we had some certain groups that were bombing places and doing different things, the black panthers, the weather men, those types of insurgents within the United States were fighting against the government killing people. So you see, the government not only had what was going on in Vietnam, but they also had what was going on here. There’s another thing about the
war that a lot of people sometimes forget, and that is that at the time the United States and the Soviet Union were the two super-powers. And quite frankly, the Soviet Union was supplying the North Vietnamese, along with China giving them equipment. They were flying against the United States Soviet-made jets. And the United States was supplying South Vietnam. And so you essentially have the fire of the two super-powers, over there fighting over this little area in Southeast Asia. So that was also part of it. It was a very, very difficult time in the country.

SC: Well you come from a mindset of honoring your leaders and having respect for those in authority. And the hippies so to speak, that group was very defiant against those in authority. They would abuse policemen, those who were trying to keep the peace. The leaders, who were trying to run the country and have you know, work out situations overseas. There just was no respect shown by these people to leaders. And that was, you know, repulsive to me. I thought, you know, that is just so defiant.

JC: You see, during the 60’s, that was a time when [inaudible]. And there were leaders of the government – the government wasn’t to be trusted during the war. There were all types of – there were strange theories to what was going on in Vietnam. There were people who would claim that we had the Vietnam War so that we could have a boost for the economy.

CS: Well, I guess hearing about these [things] did it make you support the leaders of the country more or did you feel more of an anti-war sort of thing?

JC: We were unsettled.

SC: Yeah.

JC: We were hearing it from both sides.

SC: There were different things that were upsetting. You know, the going against leaders was unsettling to us, and but then as time went on, you’d hear more things that were going on, you’d just think oh, my gosh!

JC: We weren’t over there trying to win. They were doing stupid things, stupid rules of war. You can’t bomb Hership, you can. You can’t go into Verteg, you can. It was all so politically charged and all so poor. We were, it reminds me, we were like the British, marching in straight lines in roads, and the Vietnamese were like the American Revolutionaries, taking hot spots and behind every tree, all the way it was doing that they were going into countries that we couldn’t go into because of political reasons. And it made absolutely no sense! It’s like we have a stupid situation over in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Except the American soldiers cannot go into Pakistan to get the Al Qaida leaders, we get into these ridiculously stupid rules of engagement and that’s prolonging and opening a [inaudible].

CS: Well did you have any first-hand experiences of this anti-war attitude?
JC: There were kids in the schools that umm, with all of this, the drug influence and so you have a large people from there at school who were anti-war and their peace signs and everything, and everyone would put their two fingers meaning “V” for victory, “Peace, man.” And they all began talking like that. Yeah, they influenced us.

SC: Not anywhere near the violence of the…

JC: We had more racial violence than the violence of the war.

SC: Yeah, but your school was different than mine. My school was mostly, well, I only knew of one black, and that was my older sister’s age. But so we didn’t have the racial issues because that wasn’t there. There were a few Asians but not many. And we had, it was just more of a kids in war, protected-like neighborhoods, they weren’t exposed to the city life we were from out in the country so we were more of a isolated.

JC: We had a lot of racial problems in high school. There were a lot of them. We had blacks rioting in schools and in my school we seemed to get along better than most.

CS: What kind of fights would break out?

JC: Actually, mainly the blacks would fight with themselves. Seldom did we have a lot of problems between the races, so it was a more mild experience.

SC: They were mild next to Ogden. Ogden were the worst, and that whole area.

CS: Now that was more interracial fighting?

SC: No they were more racial based.

JC: Yeah, originally, I think that they went more at it.

CS: You mentioned the drugs earlier, could you…?

SC: We had drugs at our school though I didn’t know many except you would hear of the parking lot gang, but there wasn’t very many that you would see out in the parking lot. Usually, oh what did we have, one kid my age died of drug overdose, we knew he was dabbling in drugs; he would come to school a bit glazed. We thought, ah yeah, we’re sure he’s doing it. But we didn’t have very many that I was aware of. But I was very – I keep saying protected, but that’s not the word, it will come to me…

CS: Sheltered?

SC: That’s it. We were very sheltered, I was extremely sheltered. I’m sure more went on than I knew about, but we did hear of a few…
JC: We had a lot of alcohol and lots of marijuana. And there were some kids who were gabbling in that. And then there was LSD around. There were a number of things out there, but lots of marijuana.

SC: Marijuana was. We’d got to school games and people would say, “Can you smell the marijuana?” and I was like, “what’s marijuana?” (Laughs). “You smell that smell, it’s sort of a sweet cigarette smell. That’s marijuana.” I had no clue.

JC: I used to go to the basketball games and sit up in the back bleachers and I would see people, and you’d look around and you could see the burning joint moving from row to row, and then down to the next row, and you would always smell that smell coming out, so there was a lot of that going on at school.

CS: Then do you think with the whole country, it was a lot worse?

JC: In some areas, some areas. The bigger cities, they had more problems with it.

SC: Yeah.

JC: And, you know, we had a fair amount of problems. You could buy anything out in our parking lot you wanted. And we had a lot of problems with alcohol. So, yeah, it was pretty tough. A lot of our athletes were stoned half the time, and I dunno, it was just a very common thing.

SC: It just became more available during that time and those years and I think it was because of that.

JC: It was very different; there were much harder drugs like cocaine and heroine [inaudible].

CS: Well then, did you notice at all a correlation between those who were against the war, and an increase of drug use? Were they the same people?

JC: I couldn’t say personally. I would suspect that there would be some correlation [inaudible].

CS: Now, this might be a sensitive topic, but did you say you might have known someone that died in Vietnam?

SC: I didn’t know personally this guy; I mean I had seen him before. There was – I was a sophomore and my sister was a senior, this gal was my sister’s age, so she was a senior. She lived out in Farr West with us. She had married her boyfriend. He was drafted and he was going to have to go to war. And so they got married before he had to leave, and that was like in the summer before her senior year. I can’t remember if he was a year older than her, or a year or two older than she was. So they got married, and she was extremely happy. She was a really happy gal and was so excited to be married, but devastated that
he was going to have to go to war. And I remember it seemed like it was before Christmas, so school hadn’t been in session that long. Before, oh, we were – I was in my sewing class which was on the main level of the school when you heard someone rushing down the hall, and then a door opening and closing and then you heard this scream. A cry, and by end of the school day, we had heard that her husband had been killed, in war, and that... she was never the same. She was never the same. It took her a long time that I know.

CS: Did it seem like bitterness towards the whole idea of the war?

SC: Oh yeah.

JC: It’s understandable. [Inaudible] to what the United States was doing, it was perfectly understandable. We had, I think in our neighborhood, we didn’t know him very well, but we were kind of shocked that one of them had been killed. They were over there, before he got killed. So it affected us in that it was one of our own, but since we didn’t know him very well.

SC: Yeah, we just didn’t have that many that I was aware of that were killed. You would read it in the paper, but not out in our community. I think we had some in the war, but I don’t remember, of course most of the kids we knew were around my age and that was too young initially.

JC: There probably were about ten there, and dealt with [inaudible].

SC: You would tend to find that out though, generally Jim’s uncle served in World War II and he never, never spoke about the horrors of war until Shelly was in high school, and she decided to interview her great uncle, and his wife said he had never spoken about those things to even her. It just was so traumatic that he just didn’t dwell on it, and listening to that interview about it was just heart-wrenching.

CS: Well then, having grown up during the Vietnam War, did that affect your feelings towards the Vietnamese at all, or did you know soldiers that came back and had different feelings?

SC: No, I don’t know. There just after that you saw a lot of soldiers that married Vietnamese, and had children over there, and eventually a lot of Vietnamese came here.

JC: You didn’t see too much about it.

SC: Not like it was in WWII with the anti-Japanese.

JC: We had just seen all the fear, the horror pictures that had been broadcast, and but you did hear of soldiers bearing children [inaudible].

SC: It was not an anti-race war.
JC: You had mainly the Japanese hatred, the Germans, not so much.

SC: And it was more the soldiers that had to fight, anyway…

CS: Now did you follow closely what was going on with the war?

SC: I didn’t, like I said I was very sheltered, it didn’t affect my family, and the first half of my family were just girls, and so I wasn’t so concerned about that in my family, so I was just kinda with the members themselves. Then the news was on and you would hear it and see it, and I think of rat times it was just so, oh, that my father would even turn the things off. The parents would follow it though, but the kids…

JC: With much of the war being covered, it was hard not to be affected by it being so much on television, the bomb accounts, the missions and stuff, [inaudible] sometimes we would talk about it in school.

SC: They would have the actual History classes where they would actually have to read the U.S. News or the World Report, those kinds of things.

CS: Ok, now I know you said that you didn’t think the military was following the best possible strategy…

JC: By today’s standards, those men who were Court Marshall’s were incompetent, because of the types of things they were doing. They didn’t seem to have a plan, that this is what they were going to do [inaudible] and thousands of people had to die. But you have to do this, to get an idea of how enormous it was, to go to the Vietnam War Memorial. And if you go through that without tears, you’re hard-hearted.

CS: (towards Sherri) Do you feel the same way?

JC: Yes.

CS: And then, do you know when the final peace settlement took place, what were your feelings towards that. Did you agree with that decision, were you glad it was over?

SC: We were glad it was over; we just thought, well, what have we accomplished, and so now what?

JC: Well, the ending was the United States troops would leave, and withdraw their material support for the South-Vietnamese. A lot of the anti-war people, including our Senator Candi, Congress did not support the President in the vote for the money and materials to go to the South-Vietnamese. There were [inaudible] occurred, and…

SC: So everything that we felt we had accomplished, I mean, the lines that we were trying to hold.
JC: Nothing was accomplished there.

SC: It was like everything was lost.

CS: So how old were you when the war was considered over?

JC: 1972, so [inaudible].

CS: Now do you think that with the war going on during WWII people had to ration everything, did you have any of that?

SC: We didn’t have anything like that. What our parents did with World War II and hearing about that, no we did not.

JC: It’s the same as it is now with Iraq. We knew about the war and there might be some special tax or something.

CS: Well, this is it, is there anything else?

JC: The war was a very, very terrible time and part of our history. It was umm, if the war had been won, the military service would have done what it could accomplish, and if they had put together a strategy, and an end game, we could have had a different result in it, but under the circumstances, it was a terrible time in our history. And that’s why when people look back on it, they look back on it with such strong emotions because everybody was affected. The start [inaudible] and all that that does is bring back a bad memory. A bad memory and it resulted in a lot of people being killed, a lot of people being mean, a lot of people being hurt for the rest of their lives. It was a terrible thing.

CS: Do you feel that America had learned from this?

JC: Yes, I think we’ve learned quite a bit. We won’t repeat the same kinds of mistakes that we’ve made over there. But we’ve learned a lot, a lot, especially from the first Gulf War. Where we talked about it and said it’s the use of overwhelming force that we will have as our objective and exit strategy. We need to do that now, because we’re not using the overwhelming force and don’t have a defined exit strategy. I doubt very much that Iraq will become another Vietnam. I think that people who are comparing it to Vietnam are [inaudible], but I think we are going to lose a lot more men before we get out of there. And whether it will be worth it or not, only history is going to be able to tell.

SC: You just never know how effective they can ever really be until you find out and get it established as a democracy when you have so many tyrants.

JC: The insurgents, they have no goal.

CS: (towards Sherri) Well do you have anything you’d like to say?
SC: Nope, I think that’s it.

CS: Well thank you for talking about it.