

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Barbara DeBry

By Barbara DeBry

February 16, 2004

Box 4 Folder 10

Oral Interview conducted by Julia Pulsipher

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham February 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

JP: This is Julia Pulsipher interviewing Barbara DeBry on the Vietnam War.

JP: How old were you when the war first started?

BD: Well, I was young; I was like in elementary school. Do you know the year it started?

JP: 70, no, no not the 70's.

BD: Back in the 60's. Like, I remember the day that Kennedy was shot and then I remember Lyndon Johnson getting sworn in as president, 'cuz I was in the fourth grade. So, and it was after, that was when things were starting to rumble with Vietnam. So I was still in elementary school when it, when it, when we first went to war.

JP: So why do you think we, the United States, entered the war?

BD: I think it was purely a political thing. I think it was purely egos, and um (pause). I don't think we really knew what we were getting into. And we didn't have any idea. We went over there to try and force them to, to fight a civil war the way we thought they should do it and we had no idea what we were getting into.

JP: So what do think the, the goals were of the United States?

BD: It was to make us look like we were all powerful, to, especially to our, to the other world powers. A for example, Russia, a, then Soviet Union at the time, that was what it was all about. It was all about us being the world power and we really, and in my, and I think in most people's view had no business being there. We had absolutely had no business being in Vietnam. It was not a war that we could ever have won and we should have, we, and why we should have realized that going into it.

JP: How did you feel about the drafting process?

BD: It scared me to death. Because my brother was old enough to be eligible for the draft. And I had a cousin, a first cousin, my cousin Rodney who did go to Vietnam. And I remember as a little girl going to the airport to say goodbye to him, at the airport, and seeing the turmoil and the fear that, that was, that my aunt had, even though they were a military family. It still was just frightening to me and also my brother, as I said was eligible for the draft. And so, therefore, he, he went into the, at the time there was a lot of talk. And I was pretty little like I say I wasn't really aware of a lot of what was going on, but I remember hearing people say that that people who draft the doctors who had gone to Canada so they wouldn't have to qualify for the draft. They had actually, left, left the country and gone to Canada. And I thought that was pretty pathetic to have to leave the United States to go to Canada to avoid having to go to war because they didn't want to go. And, at the time it didn't matter if you were in school. That didn't at, at first that made a difference then it didn't matter anymore. And everyone was given a draft number and then the higher your number the more likely you would be, be, called up. And so it

was always like what number are you? Was kind of, was kind of the lingo going around. And so, my brother joined the guard. And I can't remember but I guess he did that to avoid being drafted. And come to find out he had, had a really, really, high draft number which meant that he probably would not have been drafted anyway. But he ended up joining the guard and going and doing, he went and did the basic training. And I remember it was really awful for him. And I must have been really busy at that time in my life. I must have been like, early in, early junior high and I don't really remember much about him. No I was actually in high school and I don't remember much about him being gone I just knew he was gone. And, he didn't go on a mission and it just affected a lot of things in his life and, therefore, it affected a lot of things in, you know my family's life. And another interesting thing about the draft at the time was that the church was only they were only sending missionaries for 18 months because of the draft. And, a mission didn't necessarily keep you from being drafted. If I remember correctly it was just, it was just weird it was just like you didn't have a choice if you had a high draft if you had a high draft number if you, a, if you had a draft number that qualified you then you went.

JP: Nothing could stop you?

BD: Nothing. Nothing. And that was very scary to me because, news reporting, I thought during that era was different than it is now. Now it's very much live. You know the internet and everything we know what's going on all the time but back then it was just it was these reporters who just like embedded into Vietnam and they send back these just, just horrifying videos, news video of, of what was going on over there it was just horrible. I was just thinking about it when you told me that you were going to do this and I remember that I didn't even what to watch the news. I didn't want to see it. I think that a lot of people felt the same way and all we knew was that everyday they would say how many people were been killed. How many Americans had been killed. And it was tragic. It was a horrible. And they were coming home injured and you know their arms were blown off and the legs blown off and, and, we just didn't have any business being there they didn't want us there. And another big thing that influenced me and the way I remember the war, the war and this wasn't even a show that was that was on the Vietnam War but it was MASH. And MASH was the Korean War but it was almost like it kind of was mirroring that the Vietnam War. And, and the senses of it all.

JP: So how do you think the war changed from, you know, the beginning towards the end, like how did it change like your view, you know, was it like, when did you first recognize the anti-war sentiment in America, you know like?

BD: I remember it early in when I was actually in junior high because, there were a lot of protests. And I remember that during the time, at that time there were the political conventions. And that that there were protests, horrible protests there were anti-protesting at the political conventions in the summer. I think it might have been in 1968. And I also remember that I was not allowed to go to Sugarhouse Park in Salt Lake City because it was a very anti-war and there was, a lot of, there were also all of this free, thinking, peace, a incredibly strong movements and anti-war movements even in Salt

Lake City. Even in Utah. And I was not allowed to go to Sugarhouse Park because it was full of drugs, and anti-war. I wasn't even allowed to drive through Sugarhouse Park.

JP: Were they violent?

BD: There had been some acts of violence but they were pretty much on top of it the authorities were. And I also remember that at the time at the University of Utah they were doing some major renovations on the campus and they were landscaping the campus. And I remember my brother was at the time, he had done his National Guard and he was attending the University of Utah and he, I remember him saying that they had burned up the landscaping on the campus. If you know what a burm is a burm is when they, they kind of make it go up kind of like a little hill they burm it up so you know there are slopes, sloping. And they did that on purpose so it wouldn't be one open wide open space for protestors protesting the Vietnam War. And to this day, I, every time I drive along the edge of the University of Utah campus and see those burms then it makes me think about the, I think it's really true they didn't want to wide open space because they were discouraging anything, far as large protesting groups because it was awful. They used tear gas to control the groups I mean, you know it was awful.

JP: So what was your view on the soldiers who were serving?

BD: I felt like I felt like bad for them. I felt like they, there were so many of them who didn't want to go who went. And they, it was everything was negative. There was nothing ever anything positive that I ever remember. There was no pride in serving your country. It was I have to go. It was total out of; they had no choice no options. It wasn't like I'm proud to be American I'm proud to go fight for my country. Even though they tried to do that when they got over there, there was no sense of pride. It was like; I'm just trying to, to get through this so I can get home, home and get on with my life.

JP: How do you think the soldiers treated the native population in the countries that they fought it?

BD: I don't think they had any respect for the Vietnamese either. I really don't. And, I think they abused their women and there was so much drug use even among the American troops. Horrible, horrible drug use. Was not positive.

JP: Do you think the military was engaging in the best possible strategy to bring the war to an end?

BD: Given what they were suppose to, to, to accomplish over there. Ya, I think they were. But I think, it was like shooting in the dark. I just don't think that, that they. Now let me remind you I was still pretty young and I, and I was kind of really out of it. But I just. And I oh, I think I was going to tell you too that, I don't think they really had a clear vision of what they were doing. So no I don't think they knew what they were doing. And another thing I was going to tell you is like I showed you my POW bracelet which for a general. Everybody wore these. You send away for them in the mail and you sent

like 25 dollars and they had thousands of POW's prisoners of war. Boy they did not know where these people were and your prisoner you POW bracelet had the person's rank, his name, and the date he was pronounced missing. And mine was a captain John Hardy H-A-R-D-Y and the date was 10-12-67.

JP: What were you're feelings on the final peace settlement?

BD: I think it all just became we had to get out of there and they, they had a complete fall of, Saigon, and I remember that Saigon completely fell and we just airlifted out of there to get the heck out of there and I don't think anything was won. I think everyone lost.

JP: How were the returning veterans treated after the war?

BD: They weren't treated with respect. They, I felt so badly for them. They were just treated like, oh you poor, you poor guys, you had to go. And then there were was, then there was such a negative taint on what happened while they were over there, in a way they, you know this is totally my view opinion, I, I felt like as a young adolescence that they went over there and they had no morals, and they got a lot of girls pregnant and left them there. And they came back wounded; they came back with severe psychological problems because of the trauma that they had experienced for being in the war. And on top of that there was no sense of pride, there was no country, you know, there was no sense of, of nationalism, none, none.

JP: How did the war affect the community?

BD: You know, it did affect the community because what happened was then they had all those boat children that, that they there was all of those poor children and that were the Vietnamese children that, that were such innocent victims and they were sent to the United States and by boat loads. And, they came here, and I think they came with their mom's but they had no lives and they, we tried to incorporate them into our society and the only reason why I even remember that because I remember graduating from college and teaching school and having a lot of the Vietnamese children in my class, classroom. Because I taught in a, in a very low income school and I had a lot of these children in my classroom. And they were boat people. And there you go.

JP: Is there anything else you want to add?

BD: You know, I think it was, it was all just a like, kind of like a dark era in our, in our history, and I... (Break).

As I reflect back on, the Vietnam War, a couple of things come to my mind. One is, is that I did go to see, I remember, it wasn't until the 90's, going to the see the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. and just being totally taken with it. It, I had heard that it was pretty, pretty, unbelievable, it was just unbelievable and that you could really can not even put into words what it was like because it was just that wall of names that goes on forever and the names are only like an inch tall. And there are just these big slabs of wall, of, of wall and there is this, there is also this statue, and I can't remember, it's

bronze, I think it's a bronze statue of three troops, troop, you know, troops in the Vietnam War and, if you look closely you can see one's a black man, one's a supposedly, I believe one supposedly an Indian, American Indian, and another was a white person. Representing that everybody fought together on this, this war and then as you go to the memorial and what I saw were people who were just, rubbing names on paper, you know with pencil and, bawling. Looking at the name and bawling. And this is like our time, this isn't like, like going back to World War I and seeing a memorial, this is like our, our time, this our, you know, our lives, and after you ask me to get, you told me your going to this I pulled out my POW bracelet, which I still have, which I will never throw away, it made me think I wish I would have looked to see whatever happened to him, to this John Hardy, and I think I'm going to do a little digging to see if I can find out, it's probably on the internet, if I can find out what happened to John Hardy. And if I could find his family I would send them my bracelet. I mean, that's, you know, that's, I think it would be a travesty, I think the gentlemen who served there, it was only men, not women, women were, was not their thing, it, women did not want to serve in the war. They weren't allowed to it was just the men. And that's changed quite a bit. And I would like to know what happened. I think, I think the whole thing was political nightmare. I think it is admirable that you're studying it because the best thing we have with history is to learn a lot from what not to do in the future and I think that is why you're seeing what's happening with the war in Iraq is that everyone is very teen, tedi, ten, tenuous is the word, because they're afraid of what happened in Vietnam and that's how I felt. I didn't want to go to Iraq because I didn't want it to be another Vietnam. And, I am starting to have the reoccurring feelings of being so ignorant as a young girl but watching the news you don't want to hear, you don't want to watch things, you don't want to hear about more our soldiers being killed. We just, why would we want to go through that again? Plus, all of the anti-war movements that came out that were so poignant, and so disturbing, like we were talking about Platoon, and they, I, I couldn't even watch it. I remember going to see a movie on the Vietnam War and getting out in the foyer. Isn't that so sad? And I also remember seeing the play, Miss Saigon and sitting there and I was what in my thirty's and I saw it all by myself and sobbing. Just crying, sitting, because I am sure that's all so sad for me. There's no, there's no admiration, there's no, sense of, of loyalty. There's no, no national spirit of pride. Nothing that I feel about the war. And, in a way I think that's sad because it's unfair to the, to those people who had to go there. And there were so many lives that were so, just ruined by it. Those guys would come back from the war and, and they weren't embraced by, they didn't fit, they were misfits. And it wasn't their fault. And I just remember how being, being so happy that my brother didn't have to go and fight for our country. You know because they weren't fighting for our country. They weren't fighting for anything for us. It wasn't for our freedom, it wasn't, you know, it's a little bit different with the war with Iraq is, is fact that Iraq was involved with in the 9/11 situation in terrorism. And it was a little bit different. It kind of hit home a little bit more, it made you, made you happy to defend something. But with Vietnam it was all about politics. I think we had a very poor, political, poor, very, very poor political decisions. And everything then was so secretive. Now it's everything is made so public there's very little that they catch, keep from the public, unless, you know, high level military information. As far as what's going on politically, with the technology, everything is instantaneous. You know instant access to

information. And you know I remember wearing a peace sign, you know, I always wore a peace sign. It was just an interesting time because it kind of rumbled into a lot of things that happened in our country with the, that movement of free love, and peace, and then it also kind of evolved into the women's movement. And then there was that radical fight for equality among women that kind of spear headed after, which is kind of interesting. And that was more what my college experience was, was the ERA, they equal rights amendment to pass, which failed by the way. (Laugh) I'm living in Utah and being a Mormon mother and a Mormon woman at that time, was a whole other Ph.D. study. (Laugh) So, anyways.

JP: Well, thank you very much.