

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Nancy Argenian – Life During Vietnam

By Nancy Argenian

March 01, 2004

Box 4 Folder 8

Oral Interview conducted by Maggie Argenian

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham February 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Maggie Argenian: When were you born?

Nancy Argenian: October 10, 1951.

MA: Do you remember sometime during your life, the Vietnam War?

NA: Yes.

MA: How old were you during the conflict? The part that you remember the most?

NA: The part that I remember most...That would be when I was in High School. From 1966-1969.

MA: What did you think when you heard about the ongoing conflict? What did you think about the whole thing, or did you even care?

NA: I didn't understand why it kept going on and on and on.

MA: Did you know anyone that served in the War or was drafted?

NA: Yes.

MA: As far as the draft is concerned did you have family or friends that were drafted?

NA: No.

MA: What were your feelings about the draft? Did you have any friends that registered for the draft?

NA: Everyone had to register for the draft.

MA: Did you know anyone or have any family members that were drafted?

NA: No, not family members, no.

MA: Did you have any friends in High School or know anyone that was drafted?

NA: No, most the people that were drafted were older than me.

MA: Did you understand the draft and how that worked?

NA: Ya, ya, I think so.

MA: As far as the mentality where you grew up, what was the mentality of the draft? Was it a positive and patriotic view or the opposite?

NA: People were very much divided. Either they were very much against it, or they were very much for it. If you spoke against the war and didn't think that people should be drafted, you were pretty much of the "hippie" type generation. Older people had a much more patriotic view.

MA: Such as the WWII generation?

NA: Yes, yes. Until it came to, and maybe this was a "mother" thing, when somebody found out that their son had a really, really, low draft number, like five... And it was almost sure they would be drafted, well, all of a sudden they had doctors come up with all sorts of ailments that these kids had. So that they would be "4F" or un-draftable.

MA: Did you know anyone that dodged the draft?

NA: Um, No. You heard about it on the news all the time, but I didn't personally know anyone.

MA: When did you first recognize the anti-war sentiment? Or did you always remember that?

NA: As far as I can remember, it was always there.

MA: What were your feelings about the purpose of the war?

NA: I understood why we were there; to overthrow communism, to save the people of South Vietnam, obviously there would not be a reunification of the whole country, and it would always be divided into North and South. I didn't understand why we didn't just get on with it and make it a full-fledged war. It was never called a war; it was always called a "military action." It just seemed like the whole thing was kind of "half-hearted," even though lots and lots of people were dying constantly.

MA: Did you know anyone that had come home from Vietnam and when they came home they suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome?

NA: I don't know anyone that freaked out. I only knew one person that was drafted but never actually got to Vietnam; he only got as far as Germany. I don't think that that person had much trauma; he just had a really fun time in Germany, and never was actually sent to Vietnam. He got to be a mailman in Germany and played a lot and drank beer and thought it was quite good.

I knew one other person that was drafted, he was older than me. I never saw him afterwards. He was in the navy and was shot in I guess the ankle and lost the movement in that ankle. Of course he was sent home and shortly after he came home he was killed in a car accident, so I never got to talk to him about his experience.

MA: Did you feel that the military was engaging the best possible strategy to bring the war to an end?

NA: No.

MA: What did you think about what they were doing?

NA: There seemed to be a lot of contradiction as to what the political people wanted done, and what the military people wanted done. The military people were bound by the political people. I don't really think that the people, politicians, had a good enough grasp on what was going on.

MA: Do you remember when the war ended? Or more when they officially decided when they were going to pull everyone out of Vietnam?

NA: Oh yes, I remember that. I remember the "air lifts" and people trying to hang on the helicopters and what a big mess that it was. I thought it was a very humiliating thing. I felt that it was a humiliating thing for the United States that we just kind of ran. It seemed like to me.

MA: That we didn't really accomplish anything?

NA: No, I don't think that we accomplished anything. Ya, and then we just bailed out. Obviously, I don't think we were going to accomplish anything in the way that we were going about it. I think that was probably the best move; was to simply say "we're out of here." But I think it pretty much left the whole country in chaos, and open for communism of course to take over South Vietnam. It seemed that all the people who had died there, that it was just kind of a waist.

Then because it was so unpopular, you heard all the time on the news, I mean everyday, all day long, for years and years and years... that's all you heard about; "how many people were killed," "The death toll today is..." "The death toll today is..." and how the military wasn't making progress, at least not any significant progress, and yet all these people were dying. I don't know whether South Vietnamese, I never felt that they even really cared whether we were there or not. They are just poor, peasant people, they are just trying to live their lives, and here's people trying to kill them.

I thought it was a just really, really, ugly mess.

MA: Do you remember how returning Veterans were treated?

NA: Just from what I saw on the television and they were pretty much ignored.

MA: There was no praising such as the returning WWII Veterans?

NA: Oh no, no, no. No, no, no. Because it was such an unpopular war. This seemed to be so sad because, if you are drafted and you have to go fight, and then you come home and people "boo" and throw things at you. Well, it wasn't their fault. You didn't choose to go. You had a government forcing you to do something you didn't want, and then when you got home, you had civilians acting badly towards you; like you had done

something wrong. If you would have been a draft-dodger and gone to Canada, you would have been doing something wrong also. It was just a “no-win” situation for everyone, I think.

MA: Looking back, do you feel that the people of your generation have a different view of the Vietnamese?

NA: Oh, yes. I think that they have a real negative outlook on them. I think that there was a lot of negativism especially when the war ended. Then you had this massive lift of Vietnamese people to the United States. I think the other thing that was really kind of pathetic was how many children came out of this that was half Vietnamese and half American. I think that the moral standards of the Military were absolutely appalling.

MA: Did the media ever portray the harsh treatment of Vietnamese civilians by US Soldiers?

NA: They did, I think they did. Also the investigations and all that kind of stuff.

MA: To your knowledge, how did families cope with their sons and husbands being gone?

NA: I didn't really know any of them, so I can't tell you.

MA: What were your most vivid memories of the Conflict?

NA: Watching it on the news and of course Time Magazine always had horrific pictures on the front of it and Life magazine, with Naked Babies screaming. You didn't see anyone cheering for us; no one was waving American Flags.

MA: There was no patriotism?

NA: No, that's why I just don't know whether the Vietnamese people even cared that we were there or that they understood why we were there.

MA: Does it seem like we (the US) did more damage than help?

NA: Probably.

MA: Do you remember what your father thought of it, being a WWII Veteran?

NA: Gee, Maggie...he was alive for the beginning. Are you kidding, Vietnam went on forever. But he was dead in the height of it, and my mother was oblivious.

MA: Did you see much of the “Counter Culture” going on during the War?

NA: Oh ya!

MA: Did that affect your High School at all?

NA: No, because during that time in High School, you didn't get to dress or act too very weird. The rules were a little too strict. But you saw a lot of it on College campuses. Of course all you had to do was go to Hollywood on the weekend and you saw all that "counter culture" walking around.

MA: Did you ever see people protesting?

NA: Sure. Ya, they were scary. Scary people, I thought so. Ya, these were people that were very passionate about what they felt, and of course you had the police who had no idea what to do with them. And then everything usually got out of control and someone got hurt and then it was really in the news.

MA: Do you remember...

NA: Kent State. The shootings at Kent State, oh heavens yes.

MA: Anything else you want to tell me about?

NA: No, I really think it's a really unpopular subject. I think it's a subject that people are weary of; no one wants to talk about Vietnam anymore. We talked about it, we heard, we lived it everyday. Eat and breathe it. Talked about it in school, talked about it at home to the point where everyone was just sick.

MA: Did you talk about it in school a lot?

NA: Oh yes.

MA: In your history classes?

NA: In High School mostly my government classes. History classes no.

MA: It wasn't history yet.

NA: No, it wasn't history, it was still current events.

MA: So, overall, everyone was just sick of it?

NA: I think that you were just so saturated, that you really just became numb to it.

MA: When it began were people more supportive, and when it kept dragging on that's when people got angrier.

NA: I think so. I think the initial reason for giving in there was admirable, but, as I recall, we had gone in there to bail out the French who had started it. I don't think anyone had any idea of what a disaster it was going to turn out to be. Then everyday you heard more and more, "so many died," "so many died," "so many thousands died," "so many tens of thousands died." It got to the point where everyone wanted to be done with, they were sick of it. They wanted it to be over, to get out, to stop killing people, come home, and don't talk about it again.

MA: Was it something that everyone wanted to forget?

NA: Yes, to forget and have it to be over. It wasn't like WWI and WWII and any other war. There were no heroes in the respect that, we didn't win. We hadn't accomplished anything.