

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Rick Davis – The Vietnam War

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LL: Lets start with where did you serve and what was your rank and all that business...

RD: All that fun stuff. I was drafted in '68, 1968. Which was before the draft evolved into the lottery. There was a while where somebody said "What was your lottery number" you know and you said "Well, I'm a 212 or a 360" and if you were a 360 you were never gonna get called. I was back before that when it was simply your status. When you were a student you were a 2S, which meant you weren't going to get drafted or anything else. But once you, and this is what was interesting, graduated, once you got your degree, you went right back to 1A again.

LL: Really?

RD: And I went to grad school and Uncle Sam didn't recognize grad school. So, I was in my first year of Law School and was a 1A and, Bam. Got my little letter. Greetings from Uncle Sam. And that was in the fall of '68.

LL: Were you married at the time?

RD: Nope, wasn't married. It was, it was a shock only in the sense, you know, here's my letter finally. I knew lots of people who had gotten one. I was brought up in an extremely conservative Republican family, as you are well aware, and firmly believed in the war, believed in my country, wanted to do the right thing, and was ready to go when the call came. So, going to Vietnam was certainly no question when the call came.

LL: So, once you got over there, where were you at?

RD: What happened and how did it work?

LL: Yeah.

RD: The first part of the letter was a little bit of a shocker in the sense that it said "Take everything that you have and sell it, get your will. If you had a car sell it. If you had anything that was outstanding, sell it. In other words..."

LL: They weren't expecting you to come home.

RD: Get your ducks lined up because 30 days from now, well not 30 days, 90 days from now you could be dead. It was just a hard reality slap, is what it was. So, yeah, I sold my car and basically just got everything ready to go so that if by chance I didn't come back, why that was that and everything was still OK. They were drafting, you know, a lot of people at this time, so this was just a normal occurrence. It was like the missionary program of the church, it was just what was being done. Really, it was easy for someone who was a member of the church because it was like being called on a mission. I went through all my basic at Ft. Lewis, in Washington, at the base at Mt. Rainier. Half way through I had done very well on some tests, and so they told me and said you are going to become a Vietnamese interrogator. We're going to send you down to Presidio in

California and teach you Vietnamese so that you can be, literally, someone who will interview when they bring in those that they had caught. And, so, I don't know, there were a couple hundred thousand people on base and of that they took ten of us to go to Presidio. And so I started getting everything ready to go on that. And at the last minute they said, "We've changed our mind. We're only taking five." And I was number seven on the list.

LL: Dang it.

RD: So, boing, and I bounced right back into, at that point the melting pot, which was infantry. So I became infantry. The title was an 11 Bravo, 11B, which just says that you are going to be combat. You go through basic. Which is eleven weeks of just getting yourself into shape. And then after that you go into advanced training, which is called AIT, advanced infantry training. And you either have infantry or artillery or armored. And so I went into the infantry and we learned the land war stuff. You do all of those things. And they taught us all of that and by that time we were ready to go. They moved us over to an out processing area on the post, in temporary barracks. And there was a company, about 150 guys, in each one of these buildings; they looked just like dorms with 150 men in each one waiting for their orders to ship over to 'Nam. And so we sat there and the building next to us emptied and a little after that the building on the other side of us emptied, the next day this one and blah, blah, blah. And our battalion, 2,000 men, our battalion was just click, click, click, click, going and there we sat and sat and sat. And then after that four days we were the only people left and finally our officer went over to headquarters and said, "Hello! I've got 150 guys sitting over here, what's the deal?" They looked down at their paper and said "We've sent you." And he said, "No, you haven't." They said "Typo." And literally, a typo threw us into limbo. They had already sent the quota for 'Nam for that week; therefore, we were extras. So they said, "We're sending you to Korea. 'Kay, as a replacement company." Which means when you get to Korea they simply take the first three guys and say we need mechanics down in Hu Son, you guys are now mechanics and they send you down there. Or we need four cooks over here, the next four guys in line you guys are cooks. So, that's what happened.

LL: What did they do with you?

RD: So, I arrived in Korea, at Kimpo airport, which was interesting because Korea was still pretty hot. Seoul is right south of the DMZ and Kimpo was still a military airport and it still had aircraft guns and sandbags, the whole bit. Anyway, they lined us all up there and told us what was going on and pulled about twelve of us and said, "You guys have good scores you get a one time, take it or leave it, to go work at the DMZ as security for the DMZ. It's hostile time there, your gonna get shot at, and it's a war zone still, but either you're in or you're out, right now. Take your pick." And I said, "I'm in." And so I wound up being shipped instead of Vietnam, in the middle of the conflict, I wound up in Korea on the DMZ, still a hot zone. Our camp was called, well, I can't think of the name. Panmunjom. And it was the last camp on the line, the wire, the fence on the bottom of the DMZ was about from me (his office in the Taylor Building) to the parking lot out

there (about 100 yards). And they had firefights, they had flares, they had tracers, they had all that stuff going on. And the night that I got there they had a big fire fight going on and I just remember that they had these big flares and I could have gone outside the hooch and read a newspaper because there was so much light from what was going on just over there. We realized we were in a war zone because the hooches were sandbagged 6 feet high so that when you were asleep you wouldn't get shot by bullets going through the wall, but we had little bulls-eyes painted on the ones in the ceiling where it had come through. The camp was completely surrounded by a minefield which was surrounded by concertina wire, we had machine gun bunkers, we had, we were literally just a bunk, ready for anything because we were the last camp on the line. After us it was completely a military zone. Nobody ever came to that camp unless there was gonna be something to do with the peace talks which were going on which was in the middle of the DMZ. It's a thousand yards and what was interesting is that in the middle of it, it's just ground out there and there were hills and trees and stuff...And they had a bunch of buildings out there. And anything that was blue was United Nations and anything that was green was North Korea, and all you had to do was walk into a green building and you had defected. Or, if you were Korean, walk into a blue building. The North Korean guards were around just as we were around. They were all chosen for their size. I was probably the littlest guy there. 6 foot was just enough to get you in, the rest of the guys were chosen because they were big. I started as just a normal MP working at a checkpoint, looking at vehicles as they would come and go, routine. We had five checkpoints in that area itself. We would have North Koreans go by us everyday. We had to make sure that they were correct, with the number, and all kinds of stuff. After I had done this for about three months, the General, for our side, (General's name), got fired. He had done a no, no. I don't know what, he had made the old man mad at him. And as they turned around and said "Davis you're the new general's aid." I said, "Holy cow." Scare you to death, you know. You'd never seen anything higher than a major and suddenly here you're supposed to be working for a two star general. And so I was totally terrified. And they said, "Just take the car and go to his house and pick him up and do whatever he tells you to." And that's how it got started. I went to work for a general who was from Switzerland, and he was just bright as bright could be. He brought his wife, but she spent most of her time in Seoul. He was a super guy. We got along very well. I spoke French and he spoke French. And so it worked out extremely well in the since that any time we needed to say something to each other that we didn't want anyone else to understand we just switched over to French. And we used that on a number of occasions. He was obviously as a general not going to be put in harm's way. And so we didn't go anyplace that was going to be dangerous to him. There were plenty of other guys who had to go and push through the brush. So, I was, if I'm by him, I'm fine.

LL: Was that a relief?

RD: Was that a relief? Yeah, it was nice to know that you were not going to go out there and be shot at. It was, and yet the other side, you always say, well, I didn't go to 'Nam. I didn't actually go out in the bush. I was not actually, actually there like all the guys you see in the movies and doing all that stuff. My wife yells at me all the time. She says,

“Listen! You were guided. You were pulled. You were tweaked. You were everything you could imagine. I don’t want to hear a word of this. The Lord definitely had His finger on this thing and you were supposed to be there so you wouldn’t get hurt over there. Now just be quiet.” “Yes, dear.” So, that’s what happened. So, I spent my time in a relatively safe context. We went into dangerous zones, but we always had a lot of security. Whenever I would drive into the area itself, which was about seven miles on a very circuitous road up through the hills, all the hills and everything else on either side of the road were mined. So you’d never get out and go for a walk. That would have been dumb. But in addition to that to make sure the road wasn’t mined, because we’d had several occasions where someone had been blown up as the drove over a landmine. So, to make sure that didn’t happen to the General each day when we would go they would have a big two and a half ton truck, and it was a specially modified truck that had a two inch steel plate on the entire underside of the truck. The two poor souls that drove sat on sandbags and they had on their flak jackets and everything else. And their job was to drive right down the middle of the road and if there was a mine to set it off. And hopefully there was enough shielding on the bottom of that truck that it would have blown the truck in the air, but it wouldn’t have killed them. And that was to detonate whatever mine was for me. My job was to make sure that my tracks were right in their tracks wherever we went and we had a guy in a jeep behind us. No we didn’t have any problems. Yes other vehicles had problems; no, we never had any problems. So that was good. He spent a lot of time in Seoul going to meetings and going to parties. He would go to a lot of parties. We’d sit outside ‘till midnight, ‘till one, ‘till two in the morning and wait for him to come out. And he’d come out and get in the car and I’d be on the way home and I’d say, “How’d it go tonight, sir?” And he’d say, “Pretty good. Got a lot done tonight.” Because at a general level, they are way beyond fighting. They are the political end. It’s just like the Senate there in Washington. You just start talking to guys and get some promises or whatever. So that’s what happened. He was very good to work with in the since that he would get me out of trouble, well no out of trouble, but out of silliness. Every now and then we would have these big inspections called the G.I. inspections. Just nasty. Everything you had had to be lined up with a ruler, your socks had to be folded certain ways, all this fun stuff. It would take you two days to get ready for that. If we had one of those coming up I’d say “Sir, we’ve got an I.G. coming up on the 14th next month.” “The 14th next month? Oh, we’re not going to be here on the 14th.” And he would! And he’d pull me out of the area just for me. He was just super.

LL: Are you still in touch with him?

RD: Oh, I’m not; he’s probably dead. He was an avid reader. I was an avid reader. He got me even more so. Being on the last camp on the line there wasn’t much to do on your days off. Now you worked 15 and 2, you worked fifteen days straight and got a two-day break. So, what do you do? Most of the guys went on a bus down to the local lovelies and there was the typical military...yeah, anyway. All of the hookers, all of the bars, all of the kind of stuff that was available for men was obviously of no interest to me. So, what do you do? So, I did two things. Number one I read. I got to where I was reading a book a day. If you’ve got the time, you’ve got time. So I was going through, the library was about the size of this room (Bro. Davis’ office in the Taylor building), and I went

through most of that. And the general was the same way. He'd read anything. I would go into the library with him sometimes and he'd say, "Hold out your arms." And he'd stack maybe twenty books of anything you can imagine, and we'd go through those. We'd be driving along some place and all of a sudden a book would come flying over the seat from the back and he'd say, "Davis!" "Sir?" "You need to read that, that's a pretty good book." So I'd take it and a couple days later I'd toss it back and say "Yeah, that was a good book." But it was good to have it. I got into reading and I still read a lot.

LL: Were there other LDS (Latter-day Saint) people there? That you knew of?

RD: Church was almost non-existent. One of the choices I had when I left was to wear garments or not, and I chose not. This was way before the days when they started making colored garments, you know green and others. And we were told, when I went, to leave our garments home. It was pretty much, it is suggested. It was a good thing, it really was. Where I was and with what was going on they would have been laughed at. Even though the group I was with was a more intelligent than average group, they still would have been ridiculed and it would have served no purpose. It's weird. You just feel absolutely naked for two years. Because you haven't gone with out them you know your whole life and all of a sudden you take them off and you feel weird. We never had church. There was a church on the post, but it was just a generic church for those guys who wanted to. There was one other guy in the unit who was LDS, but he was jack. He was LDS in title only. And so no I never did anything; I never went once to church. I never had any LDS services that were even available. It's just one of those things. It was just one of those things. It's just one more time when you realize how much you have when you finally have to leave it. Then you go back home and you say it's nice to go to church on Sunday.

LL: As you understand it, what was your goal for being there? What was the goal for the U.S. in being there?

RD: This was totally a serve your country and we were over there to win. We were in it more to win. And it's been very interesting to watch the media and the political twist that this has been given. Your generation grows up hearing about how terrible Vietnam was and how it was heated. That obviously is half the story and the other half is the other half. It was very much a war that we were in to win. I think that you need to understand Vietnam in context. We had just been out of World War II. We had just been out of Korea. By the late 50's, early 60's Khrushchev was the one who as in power in Russia. Khrushchev stood in the United Nations took off his shoe and banged on the podium and said, "We will bury you." Scared us to death. And in '57 Russia put up the first satellite, not America. They beat us in the space race. Scared us to death. And so I went into physics as a college degree. I was a physics major when I started because I wanted to be one more inch nearer to helping America when in the race against Russia. The whole James Bond thing was absolutely real. The site out here in Idaho Falls that was where they invented the atomic engines for the submarine, the Nautilus and everything else. All of the nuclear submarines were created in Idaho and the guys who actually worked on them came to Idaho to train, of all places. So we knew that if we ever had a war that

would be it. I mean here we are thirty miles from there. And so we knew that if the war was fought that would be bombed and we were all going to die. The mushroom cloud would form out here to the west and obviously the way the wind blows we were in a direct line and that was it. The nuclear scare was bad enough that people were advised to build fall out shelters. My father did. My father's home has a genuine fall-out shelter in it. Still. My Sunday School teacher not only had a fall-out shelter, but he owned a store downtown where he sold survival foods, dehydrated foods and all that stuff like we talk about today, but this was the real stuff. Because you honestly believed that if things didn't go right we were going to get bombed by the Russians. In the middle of that then comes Kennedy, and Kennedy didn't know much about politics and was very young and got in there. His youth showed very quickly. The Bay of Pigs fiasco was just a complete disaster. Right after that when you go into the six days in May when we went nose to nose with the Russians to see who was going to blink. War was very close and very much a concern. All right, with Russia expanding on all fronts, globally we on the other side needed to do whatever we could to stop that. So for us, Vietnam and the whole notion of North Vietnam going south and incorporating it, much less Laos and Cambodia and China going north, we said we've got to step into this and stop it as soon as we can rather than just let it proliferate until it finally shows up in Mexico. Vietnam for us was a very real, very obvious political choice that was the correct thing to do. Why did the war turn sour? A couple of reasons: one, it was all done by politicians that were clueless as to what it was actually like out in the field. It's kind of like wolves here in Idaho or up in Yellowstone. We've got people in Washington who says, "You should have wolves in Rexburg" and we say, "I don't think so because they eat the cattle." I've got two guys in class right now who have shot wolves and will stand right here and say, "Yes, I have." My father has. He took the collar off and I won't tell you what he did with the collar. Anyway, that's how it is. The point is you've got politicians who are clueless as to what the actual conditions are. Vietnam was kind of the same thing. We couldn't sneeze over there without getting permission from Washington first. We had a river that if I'm on one side and you're on the other side shooting at me I cannot return fire because you're technically not in Vietnam. You are in Laos or something like that. So there you are, under fire, and you can't fire back because it's incorrect. Well that's where the Green Berets and all the rest of that stuff comes in. Those guys went over the river at night and took care of the problems. The other thing that really made a difference is television. It sounds hard to believe, but television didn't exist when I was a kid and I watched television created. Then I watched what television does in terms of informing the public. Not until the '60s did the average family have a chance to actually sit down at night and watch the news with Walter Cronkite and see actual footage in Vietnam of people being shot. War until that time, war in World War II, war even in Korea was at least six months removed from the average person in the States. Even the guys who came home came home on ships. So it was very slow and there was kind of a settling down, a kind of calming down a time of getting back into reality. Missionaries is an easy way to explain it. How do you take a missionary who's been in Bolivia for the last two years and then three days later coming through Seattle, four days later they are standing in the middle of someplace with a McDonald's sign down the road. They hadn't even seen a toilet for the last three months. So, there was a lot of shock that way. But the TV finally made the average American, just the average Mom and Pop, suddenly realize how bad war was.

That war was war. That we had 50,000 plus Americans getting shot over there and more in '68 with the Tet Offensive when we just got our tails kicked over there. So, it was bad, bad, bad. So everybody said this is no good let's get our boys out of there. This is crazy. What are we doing fighting clear over on the other side of the planet for people that who I can't understand, who are little weird people anyway? And the average American, I'm sorry, is a redneck and is clueless about what is going on. So, all they can see is the short vision of our son shouldn't be over there let's get him home. Then you started to add to that the political mix, massacres and stuff like that. And that was just one more reason for getting us out. Then you had all of the stuff going on at home in the sense of the students. '68 was the year we shot Bobby. I watched JFK killed. I watch Martin Luther King killed. I watched Bobby killed. I watched cities burned up. I mean this was on the news at night in America. I watched Detroit burned. I watched Baltimore burned. On the campus where I was attending I watched a building burn to the ground.

LL: Do you think this was all directly related?

RD: Yes, it was related because everybody suddenly became aware at home of what was going on over there. So, the students were all mad and said, "I'm not gonna go." And yet the flip side of it, there were plenty of students who said, "No, we should be going and this is how we serve." We had plenty of people who went to Canada. We had all kinds of people who did that. Heaven help them if we ever got a hold of them, I mean the guys who were my group, let's say, beat the crap out of anybody who was a draft dodger. I mean we say love it or leave it. If you can't stand for America then get out of here, but I'm not gonna have you next to me, you low-life. So that was very very strong. I had a student in class who had been a hippie in California who she had married another guy and they had gone to Canada, were living in Canada and then she came back as a mother and took my class. She was in her thirties at least at the time. She got in just horrific arguments in the class. I happened to have another mother in the class whose husband had served in Vietnam and those two were at each other one day until class thought that we would have to pull them apart. I mean it almost got physical. The one mother just said, "This would have been real easy. My husband would have shot yours." When it gets to that point in a class you realize this is real, this is real. So, Vietnam was the first time I think in a war sense that war came home to the people in America, to the average person in the street. I think that's why it got so bad. When you get Hollywood involved in it like Hollywood does that bunch of nitwits. Jane Fonda. I got an e-mail two days ago, Jane Fonda this year is being nominated as one of the hundred best women of the century. I got a three page e-mail saying, "Excuse me" that showed her in North Vietnam sitting with there with some other people around her. She was completely Pro-North Vietnam, anti-war like Hollywood. There were guys who were brought out to meet her who said, "OK, she's doing all this because she knows better and she's really here to help us. She is just saying all this for the cameras. It's really not true." So these guys went to the extreme dangerous position of slipping her a piece of paper with their name and rank and social security, military I.D., on it so that they could get the word back to know where these people were. Because we had prisoners there behind the lines. When she got to the end of the line, she shook hands with about five of the guys, when she got to the end, they had palmed her these pieces of paper, she took all of these and turned

around and handed them to the officer there. Who turned around just after she left, they beat three of these guys to death, on the spot. The other two, one of whom is the guy who wrote this article. So, when you see people killed because of someone like Jane Fonda, I mean I get an e-mail from somebody like that who says you think she's great but look at what she did. So, yes, there's still a lot of that kind of stuff. One of the guys who was over there with me is still a good friend. I write him a Christmas card every year; he's in Denver, Colorado right now. I e-mailed him that one.

LL: How did you know him?

RD: He was just a guy in my unit. We met over there. Just a big old rugged guy from Nebraska, came out to Idaho just after we got out. He said, "Davis, I've never seen anything higher than a haystack. I'm coming out." I took him up on Table Rock and he about went nuts. It was so fun. We were out together when we came out. We out processed in Seattle. We had just come over from Korea, gone through the out processing in Seattle and literally walked out onto the street to go downtown and do a couple of things down there and got spit on, in about the first hundred steps. I still don't know why we didn't turn around and kill those guys. All my training, hand-to-hand and everything else, had taught me how to kill somebody quickly. I still wonder why we got spit on, I think it was shock. I think that we just looked at each other and said, "What?!" I mean we had here and there, but to actually have it happen to you as you walk by. The two of us could've easily taken those two guys out. We just kept walking, but the more I thought about it the madder I got. That was just welcome home. Thanks a lot.

LL: Why do you think that usually the loudest voices are the ones against it? The loudest ones are usually the ones protesting whatever the government is doing, have you ever noticed that?

RD: Because the media is on their side. That's the short answer. The media will only print what the media wants to hear. The media had always had its own agenda. It has never been conservative. Movie stars are the easiest example. Barbara Streisand said, "If George W. Bush gets elected I'm going to go to England." I'm still waiting for her to move. Just think of some of the movie stars who have done everything they can to say how terrible this is. Well, they're wrong, but because they are movie stars they have instant credibility, instant notoriety, instant footage. Danson, for example, in the '80s, I know this sounds crazy, but in the '80s global cooling was the big scare, not global warming. It hasn't been that long. We were told straight up that the world was going into the next ice age, that we were all going to have the ice come down and cover the north part of North America. Ted Danson was extremely vocal. He went to Washington, he testified before congress and he was wrong, completely wrong. Now here we are fifteen years later and the sky is falling, but this time it's heat. Well, obviously I don't believe any of it and the only reason why you hear those people is because of Hollywood. Want to read a real good book on it get the one by Dixie Lee Ray. She has a PhD in science. She rebuts all those articles. She was the mayor of Washington State, know her stuff. Instead of just spouting political diatribe she give you facts. And you ask, "Well how come we never hear this on TV?" Because it's not what they want you to hear.

LL: What would you say was the biggest effect this experience had on you?

RD: On me? Everybody, you know, it's like a mission, and everybody said it would be the best two years of your life, the hardest two years of your life. Everybody said the same thing here. For Mormons it's real easy to understand. Was your mission fun? Yes, well maybe not that word. Was your mission hard? Yes. Was it good? Yes. Well, this is exactly what the army was. I did things that I don't ever want to do again. But on the other hand, I did things that I never thought I could do and yet did. So, it was an extremely positive personal experience in that I was pushed beyond what I thought were my limits and still came out in good shape. And so it was a good experience. It really was. It was also really good for me politically to make me define where I stand and why I stand there and to be able to support it and to hopefully coax others to do the same. That is why I jump on my students if they can't support their position. I don't care what your position is, just don't be one more Hollywood knot-head, saying whatever is politically correct, but you don't really know the facts about that. I just get tired of actors, acting.

LL: You were there from '68 to '70?

RD: '68 to '70.

LL: That is all the questions I have. Thanks Brother Davis.

RD: You're welcome.