

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Scott Esty – Life during Vietnam War

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March 03, 2004

Box 4 Folder 12

Oral Interview conducted by Katherine Esty

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham March 2005

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Esty, Scott. Interviewed by Katherine Esty, 3 March 2004, Rexburg. Tape recording. Brigham Young University Idaho, Rexburg.

Katherine Esty: Ok, the first question is, where did you live during the Vietnam War?

Scott Esty: Ok well, I was living overseas actually from 1966 through '70 we lived in South Africa, and then in 1970 we lived in Europe, first in Holland and then England. So we were viewing the Vietnam War from the perspective of foreigners. I turned 18 in 1971, and so that was my draft year, and I had several older friends that I was acquainted with that were drafted into the war. We had not lost any friends, being killed yet. I had some people that I had known wounded, so I was not sure how my feelings about the, well I was actually quite opposed to the war and the draft, so.

KE: What were the reasons you were not drafted?

SE: Well, actually the draft year, my draft year they were doing birthday lotteries, and my birth date came up as number three hundred, so and they were only getting into the hundreds, so I was quite unlikely to be drafted.

KE: The people that you did know that were drafted, did you know them after the war? And if you did, how did they change?

SE: The people who I had knew before the war and after the war, who had gone to Vietnam, I did not know anyone through that period because I had been moving around so much, and none of my relatives, direct relatives were drafted, but people I knew at college later were very angry about the war, people who had experience there, well none of them were good. They were all very opposed to military action, particularly the way things were being run, political funding.

KE: What were your feelings about those people who resisted the draft?

SE: Well I thought that they were standing up for their own consciences and I was very glad that I did not have to make the decision. I was feeling at the time, my opposition to war probably would have extended to my being opposed to the draft myself, and actually I was very active in opposing the war.

KE: What was your understanding of America's goals during the war?

SE: Well I knew the party line, that the goal was to prevent communism from spreading, and the domino theory that one nation falling to another, but actually having lived in Africa under...regime, and having seen totalitarian rule that wasn't communist, actually I personally became very sympathetic to the communist cause so I wasn't opposed to communism per se, although I was not excited, I did not think that Chinese communism was as powerful option as European communism.

KE: So were you in America during anytime during the Vietnam War?

SE: No. Well actually, I guess, yes I was because, well I am trying to think here, because later on I actually came back to go to college, and then I went on my mission from '73-'75 by the time I came back in '76, was basically winding down. So I saw the Vietnam War from mainly overseas, and I saw it as, actually American imperialism at its strongest, America trying to take over. I opposed America's problem on the other side.

KE: Was the anti-war sentiment always strong overseas; was the opinion of most people against the war?

SE: Most people were quite opposed to the Vietnam War, just about everywhere. Although people who were vocally anti-communist, like in South Africa, they were supporters of the war. Americans were trying to stop communism, but most everyone else saw it not so much as stopping communism, as America forcing or trying to be the big bully on the world stage, so it was not popular anywhere, and practically how America was treating the people who were opposed to the war at home, because America opinions, but instead the government would basically try and quell opposition, and took opportunities, many opportunities to...and condemn people for expressing their opinions against the war. In fact that was what led to my protest against the war. They sent National Guard troops on to a university campus at Kent State, Ohio, to stop a protest march, and they opened fire on them and killed them. So result of that, I had organized a march on the American Embassy in London to oppose some kind of totalitarian practices in the United States, and they, actually what we, because of those kind of things, so we organized a march on the American Embassy and then led a march to speakers corner, where we denounced those practices of the United States.

KE: How many people marched with you?

SE: At least a hundred.

KE: Were you the only leader, or were there others who organized it?

SE: Yea, there was a girl and myself. Actually it was a class project for our history class we were taking. We were supposed to do a class project, and it could take any form. We originally opposed, actually we started to organize the march to protest, well the war in Vietnam, in general, and then Nixon decided to bomb Cambodia, so we changed the protest march to emphasize our opposition to the bombing of Cambodia. But then the Fifties at Kent State, they also organized this march to oppose the bombings of Cambodia, and it was during that march that the government sent the National Guard out to the military, to murder them, and so we decided to change the meaning of our march to oppose, to object, denounce the murdering of the Kent State students.

KE: How did the American Embassy react to your march?

SE: Well, they sent out, actually the girl who organized the march with me, Jill Miller, her father was the American Consulate General. And he, actually went to out to receive

our petition, and didn't know his daughter was going to be organizing the march, and so when he came out and saw her, and me, and the other students he angrily took the petition and didn't say anything.

KE: Did they respond to the petition?

SE: No, they ignored as they did all other vocal opposition or other written opposition forms.

KE: Did you feel your protest had any influence?

SE: It allowed us to feel like we were expressing our opinions, and we felt like we were able to at least let other people know that we were opposed. In fact we marched probably about five miles through the center of the city of London, and because we were all student Americans, and we were in Britain, and we did a good job of altering the media to what we were doing, the media coverage was really quite good, our picture was actually on the front page of the *International Herald Tribune*, among other things. And we were all children of American executives, or embassy executives, like Jill Miller's father, who was Consulate General, and so we had quite a bit of identity that people could write about, or make stories about.

KE: How did this war affect feelings towards the government?

SE: Well, I feel that the U.S. government has good principles that it is based on, but its practices are in gross opposition to those principles or it sometimes ignores those principles. At the time I didn't really understand the principles that governed the country so I was very angry with the government. I feel that all governments have tremendous weaknesses, and that patriotism, blind patriotism, can be very destructive and in fact blind patriotism to either a country, or a cause, or a religion or whatever that causes every war that we're seeing today, and has the potential. I feel that we are all humans on earth, and that the idea of individual governments actually goes against that, building a brotherhood and an international corporation. I feel that being patriotic or pledging allegiance to one country is wrong, and I actually I have not pledge allegiance to the flag since I was twelve or younger.

KE: Do you think that the people that participated in protests or rallies understood the war, or just were going with the flow of what was happening?

SE: I think in our particular rally there were many who had interest because our names were on the list to potentially be draftees or relatives of draftees. In other countries people were opposed to the war, because they thought American imperialism. And sometimes people get caught up in rallies, protests, I am sure that happens. I saw somewhat later, when I was at a university, and students would go on a rampage to protest things they were opposed to, and get carried away and get violent about it, I don't think a protest should be violent, but it can serve to let people know that are opposition feelings.

KE: What were your feelings about the final “peace” settlement?

SE: I feel that the entire war process had so many political objectives that kept changing, that it was difficult for the professional fighters to wage an effective war as well. But I was very glad when it finally settled, and all the objectives the US had been saying they were there for they just gave up on. So it made it quite clear that the war was too little effect anyway. There was very little substance to what the US claimed they were trying to do.

KE: Were you in America after the war ended?

SE: Yes, I came back after my mission.

KE: How were the returning veterans treated?

SE: Because of that there was very little perspective that they were returning heroes, and in fact unfortunately a lot of people who were opposed to the war blamed the veterans for the war, and that was very unfortunate. Because the veterans were there because they were forced to be there, they had a difficult time trying to justify the war, and things were so poorly managed. The politicians in Washington would try and run the war from Washington, and did not let the professional soldiers fight the war, big mess.

KE: Have your feelings toward the government changed, since after the war?

SE: Yea, I think I have come to better understand a lot of the difficulties in governing, and I better understand now, the principles of freedom and the principles the founding fathers wanted to have our country to stand for, but I always see more clearly how badly we represent those principles, and in fact my feelings about the government is that it is a major failure in many respects. And the political process serves people’s selfish ends, not the greater good. It’s difficult for me today, I often times feel very angry for the wrongs the government has perpetrated on our people.

KE: Has your feelings toward the war changed?

SE: Not so much. I think that the Vietnam War maybe helped to thwart the spread of communism in that part of the world. Vietnam and the country has actually done very well coming out of the conflict. There is still a great deal of oppression, but there is oppression in communist countries and supposedly our allies. Singapore is probably more oppressive then any communist country ever was and still is today...

KE: Did you hear stories about how the soldiers treated the natives? And if so what were they?

SE: There were many reports of massacres, village massacres brought against the Vietnams people. I understand war is very difficult, particularly in a situation like that, to

tell friends from the enemies, enemies from the friends. Consequently a lot of unfortunate things happened, and it could have been prevented probably in retrospect, but at the time probably seemed very right to the people involved, and it's hard for us to judge, we can't appreciate fully what was happening at the time.

KE: Did you notice any effects the Vietnam War had on any of the countries you were in overseas?

SE: Yea, there was, I believe that the Vietnam War and American imperialism policies gendered a great deal of resentment and criticism of the United States, and so attitudes towards Americans, although many times Americans individuals were quite welcome, but still a lot of that general opposition did translate into anti-Americans feelings to a level, and that is true today. But then again also, it may not necessarily be connected to the war...it is hard to say what war...success of America, which at other people see at their expense, not so much as America is successful, but that are doing bad because America is doing good.

KE: Did you notice how the American's were treated that supported the War?

SE: I rarely saw anyone that supported the war; I don't think I ever was with people who were for the war.

KE: How much press and attention was given to the Vietnam War overseas?

SE: It was actually quite visibly covered, particularly every time there was a major attempt, everyone knew pretty much what Nixon and Johnson were doing. Ordering the troops here, ordering the troops there...probably one the wars, the first wars that was really well covered, international. Certainly all the US magazines, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, were a constant feature. My family got the *Time* and *Newsweek*. We probably saw it more from that point of view, then most Americans living overseas.

KE: Did you ever see any movies that were pro, or against the Vietnam War?

SE: I have since seen some of the ones that were opposed, or portrayed the horrors of the war, and I think a lot of the cinema portrayed the misery of the war, it is hard...the government had no personal ownership of the war.

KE: Did you have any other stories?

SE: I think that any war in retrospect takes on different personalities, and after the fact the, some people, like John Kerry, are trying to promote the fact they were war heroes, when in fact in times of the war they were quite outspoken critics of the government. Now their having war medals, to show value. It's very easy to be rewrite history after the fact, and I think the people I met after, that had been in the war, they just felt very great personal tragedy, having been involved in it, not having any support at home for their activity, not feeling they were supported there by their leaders, or their politicians or their

government, and also not knowing what their reasoning for being there was. The tremendous number of personal, very sad tragedies in personal lives is a very high price to pay for an activity.

KE: How do you think the opinion was towards the soldiers during the Vietnam War, was it mostly negative, or did they respect the men for going?

SE: Most everyone seemed to be draftees, and they were more viewed as prisoners of the government, then war heroes. Soldiers were seen; unfortunately a lot of people criticized the soldiers for actually being involved, when they did not have much alternative. I suppose they could have protested the draft and gone to Canada, like many, many people did, but we could not have had a whole generation uproot itself to Canada. They had to do what they did, they probably tried to do it the best they could, unfortunately the people at home saw them as patriots, so they got blamed, which I think is very unfortunate.

KE: Did you see in a lot of returning soldiers a loss in patriotism, a loss of trust in the government?

SE: Yea, a lot of the returning soldiers had varying loyalty to the government. They saw the government having mismanaged the war, and politicians having played with the war, as their own play thing, their own political tool, and based on election schedule in the US, events would transpire in Vietnam, and so it was seen as basically a political tool of the political process. I think the soldiers who were involved, and the people at home were very disillusioned, and the idea of blind patriotism, a lot of people questioned, why be patriotic a political process, not so much a government principle, but it's more the politics of government.

KE: Did you notice any propaganda during the War?

SE: Yea, there was continual government propaganda. I think it was still in the era of the government trying to control the media, many times the government would try and put their spin on things, and the media would just print it. But it was also the beginning of the era of the media not just cow tailing to the government control of the media, they started to feel more independent report on the war, because of satellite communication in the early 70s, the war basically came home, the war in your living room nightly. I think it was really the first time that kind of graphic exposed the horrors of the war. It raised a lot of mixed feelings.