

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

David F. Berry Jr.

By David F. Berry Jr.

February 23, 2004

Box 4 Folder 4

Oral Interview conducted by Heidi M. Berry

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham January 2005

Brigham Young University - Idaho

HB: I am interviewing Dave Berry who just graduated high school during the Vietnam War. Okay, first question, where were you born, Dave?

DB: I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. The first Eskimo born at the Deseret Hospital. That is what they said, but I am not Eskimo.

HB: How old were you when you moved to Alaska?

DB: Three months old.

HB: So if you had just graduated high school, you were about 18?

DB: Right.

HB: So what was the condition of the war when you were 18?

DB: It was actually winding down and I remember seeing the scene from the Saigon Embassy when the helicopters were on the roof, and they were helping some people onto the helicopters and forcibly keeping others from getting into the helicopters. And that stuck with me ever since.

HB: You were still going through high school when it started getting really controversial, right?

DB: Right, I was in high school.

HB: Do you remember anything, any of the issues about that, any of those topics? Were they discussed a lot in your school?

DB: They weren't discussed so much in our school as they were discussed in our home. Knowing your Grandmother, she had an opinion on everything, the thing that was going on in the world, and why it was wrong. So, as you can understand, there were some very heated discussions. She is a very liberal person, and I am a very conservative tight wad, so as you can understand, there were some very heated discussions.

HB: What was her opinion about it?

DB: It was wrong, we were murdering babies and children and women and children and we shouldn't be over there. She sometimes completely forgot that it was children over there fighting for our country too. So it really hurt me a lot when she would always refer to kids my age, saying they were murderers. Still to this day I have a hard time dealing with that.

HB: What was Grandpa's opinion?

DB: Well, you know, Grandpa was career military man so, he said his peace and walked out.

HB: Was he for or against it?

DB: Well, I don't think he was so much for the war as he supported our troops no matter what they did because he was in there for so long. Sometimes I would come home late at night after wrestling practice. I'd watch my dad sit on a chair and he'd be watching the news, and I could see it in his eyes that he understood what they were going through and I think he wanted to bring them home.

HB: Was Grandpa in the Korean War, Dad?

DB: Yeah.

HB: So he knew what it was like to be over in that area?

DB: Yep.

HB: He knew the politics?

DB: Yes, he knew exactly what was going on.

HB: He didn't want them in there because he knew what it was like.

DB: Plus, he was looking for his brother.

HB: Which uncle was it?

DB: Uncle John was over there for seven years.

HB: Seven years? In Vietnam?

DB: Yeah. He was over there first with the Marine Corps, then with the U.S. Airborne, then with the Green Berets. He was over there for a long time.

HB: Was there ever a point where you really understood that we weren't winning? Was there ever a point where you just knew?

DB: Well, that is a misconception. Whenever the U.S. military fought in an engagement, whether it was a squad level size or a full division size, we never lost. Why we lost that war is because it drug on for so long and it became politicalized. The politicians ran the war. You had to get permission to attack this; you had to get permission to defend from being attacked on this. Once politicians get involved, it is no longer a military war where the objective in a military war is so strong and so focused that you know you have to destroy the other side. But, when you get politicians involved, you get it all muddy.

That's what happens, that's why we lost because they lost focus and what the outcome of the war was, which was to win.

HB: So it was too much compromise between the politics.

DB: Exactly. They compromised over everything and it cost us many, many men.

HB: Was there a lot of debates between just people you knew? Back home, when you were going to school, was it evident that was for the war, who was against it?

DB: Yeah, it's the same thing today. It's the people who are fighting against people getting jobs that are fighting against tourism, fishing, logging mining. Those same people would march with flags against the war. And it's so disheartening to see the same people that I saw objecting to the war objecting to my kids getting jobs. It sometimes gets a little depressing.

HB: Good job, Dad.

DB: Well, you're talking to a professional politician.

HB: For 20 years, right? From the beginning of the war to the end of it, did any of your views change, your image, how you saw it?

DB: Yeah, it did actually. When the war started we didn't have TV in town. I was a lot younger then so I would just goof around outside. When we first got TV, I remember the first time that we saw Walter Cronkite. Back then, TV was black and white in Haines and I saw those putting young men into body bags and carry them out. It just made my stomach on fire.

HB: You didn't want to see it.

DB: Nope. Because one, I knew that my uncle was over there and two, I am only three years before I am over there.

HB: When did the draft stop?

DB: I don't really remember when it stopped, but I know that they had stopped it in Alaska earlier than in the lower forty-eight, because at one time 10% of the adult males in Haines that lived there were in Vietnam. Our senators, I think it was Senator Mike Revell, actually commissioned an investigation why so many Alaskans per capita were being drafted. Hoonah, for instance, lost almost an entire generation of men because they were drafted, not many of them got killed. I don't really remember when it stopped, but I know I was starting to get a little nervous when I was in high school.

HB: What was your image of the Viet Cong and the leaders and Vietnamese countries?

DB: Well, I knew from history that the Viet Cong were very determined, hardworking people. They were just like you and I, maybe a little smaller in stature. I knew they loved their country, they loved their families, and they looked at us as an aggressor/invader type thing. But, I do remember when I read the history on the commanding general for the North Vietnamese Army, and he was talking about the Marine Corps and he said he would have given his left arm and his left leg for one division of U.S. Marines. He said that whenever his men went against the Marines, they would end up running and hiding because the Marines were so determined and so good at what they did that they were never close to beating them.

HB: Was there any negative portrayal of the Vietnamese people?

DB: Oh yeah, of course you're going to see that. I heard all sorts of derogatory, nasty, dirty names that were directed toward them. I even remember when I was younger and in the service, I am sure that I can vaguely remember using them quite frequently. In order for you to understand and accept that you are trying to take a human life, you've got to de-humanize them. You've got to make it so that they are not human in your own mind. The more that you can make them look like an animal or a savage being or something, the better you feel. A lot of that happened.

HB: I remember prior to September 11, when you think of Jihad, you really had no conception of what it really was. But, it wasn't until after September 11 when a stigma was attached to being Muslim, and the entire Middle East. When things happen between countries, all of a sudden, these are the enemy, they are evil.

DB: I agree with you, but in order, this is my personal opinion, in order for them to plan such a sophisticated attack on the United States, they must have looked at us as evil and scum for decades. I can't fathom that, really.

HB: Both sides do it, pretty much. You have to. So, Uncle John was in the war for seven years, but did you have any friends that graduated before you that went?

DB: Yes I did.

HB: Did they come back? All of them?

DB: We didn't lose one man from Haines.

HB: Good. Did any of them volunteer?

DB: If I am not mistaken, two classes ahead of me, I think 15 volunteered all together. And they all went through the 101st Airborne and this is a story that Dave Land told me, a good friend of mine. They had just shipped over to Saigon and were shipped over the DMZ zone. They were sitting in this little valley; he said there was fog everywhere, mist. It was hot and cold at the same time. It was really quiet, and all of a sudden they heard this laugh. It was Dave Land, all the Albecker brothers, a bunch of Hotch's, and Ronnie

Martin. All together, I think there were 12 guys from Haines, the 101st in that company. They said, "Do you guys here that? Hey I recognize that laugh." They walked down this little hill, and there was Uncle John. Uncle John was their platoon sergeant.

HB: Really? How long were they gone?

DB: Most of those guys were gone a year, a year and a half.

HB: I know that once it started, once it got really bad, they put a limit on it because it was just so hard on the men.

DB: Normally in combat, it's usually 12 months. Then they send you state side for a while.

HB: You didn't say that anyone was killed, but do you know of anyone who was killed?

DB: No, I didn't know anyone personally that was killed. But I knew a lot of people that were severely wounded.

HB: What about other health problems, like post traumatic stress disorder? Did anyone come back with that?

DB: Yeah. A lot of people did.

HB: Do you have any memories?

DB: Well, I know Joe Ludlum, he still has nightmares to this day when he was killed. He was sitting behind an M-16 machine gun, and he was being fired on by a 7.62 machine gun that the VC had and he watched a round come down, hit the top of his barrel, roll around his barrel and hit him in the head. He woke up in the dead pile 12-16 hours later. He was dead and they put him in the dead pile.

HB: He still remembers that, huh.

DB: Yeah, he still has nightmares about that. And Don Hotch, you know Bosch, still has nightmares when he got shot down in the helicopter.

HB: When I was friends with his daughter, Priscilla, he told stories.

DB: He was a lucky man. He broke six ribs, his back, his neck, his collar bone, his wrist, everything, but he survived.

HB: I remember him telling me that he was in a helicopter and he said that he remembers vividly this voice in head telling him to jump out of the helicopter. If you are not LDS, and if you are not used to the Spirit, you rationalize it away, it is the only thing that you do. He didn't jump out and then he said it happened again and he jumped.

DB: And then he jumped and the other nine men on the chopper were killed.

HB: He still remembers that to this day. He had a hard time talking about it.

DB: Yeah, he still has nightmares about it; he has talked to me about it.

HB: Tell me a little bit about Uncle John. Did he tell you any stories?

DB: Well, he did tell me when he came back the last time that he was staying at Uncle Buds, and David, my cousin came to wake him up and before John realized anything, he had David in a neck hold and was breaking his neck. Finally, he came conscious enough to stop. He committed himself to a psychiatric ward in San Francisco for a while. But he told me, because he was the smallest guy in his unit, he is not very big, maybe 5'8" and 130 pounds. They used to put him down in the tunnels. He told me one time he was down there, and they gave you a 45 and a flashlight. If you hear any sound, you are supposed to fire all your rounds from your 45 and then turn on your flashlight to see what it is. He was down there, he's stopping and he hears something ahead of him moving in the mud. He freezes and then he hears something tapping on his flashlight, tap, tap, tap, tap, and he turned the light on and there was one step snake waiting for him. He killed that but if he had kept going like you normally do, that snake would have bit him and he would have died in five seconds.

HB: So what are these tunnels, what tunnels are these?

DB: The VC drug tunnels.

HB: Under the ground?

DB: Under the ground. Honey, they had massive tunnels under the ground. Entire brigades and battalions lived in them. Just huge, huge massive tunnel systems. They were all booby trapped. So when the Americans came down, they got as many as they could before they got away.

HB: So when Uncle John would go down into these tunnels was his purpose to go down to see if there was anybody – was he a scout, was it reconnaissance?

DB: He was down there as reconnaissance first because he had this uncanny sense, like the rest of his family. You can put us anywhere and we can find our way out, we've got uncanny directional system, we spot things out of the ordinary. He could find trip wires; he could find booby traps really easily. So they sent him down all the time and he came out. He told me one time, he didn't like to talk about it, but he's telling me one time that they sent him down there and he heard noise in front of him and he got his piston and he was getting ready to fire all his shots off and above his head and turned the light on and there was a women and three children in front of him. He told me that if he had fired that pistol, he probably would have killed himself too.

HB: I'm sure he would have. He probably didn't like to talk about these stories.

DB: No he didn't. I know that he was very successful at what he did, that was why every unit that he joined sent him back over there.

HB: So when these guys came back, were they treated differently? Were they not treated well at all?

DB: No, they were not treated well.

HB: What kind of things happened?

DB: They were shunned. They were belittled. They weren't even accepted by the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign War for quite a while. They were treated disgustingly. And, even when I came back in 1979, no one talked to you, no one acknowledge you even though you were in the service for nine years. They didn't do anything; they just treated you real bad. And it hasn't been since recently, since Desert Storm that they've again treated American Serviceman as a hero, because they are heroes. Everything we have today can be traced to some act from some U.S. soldier or some American citizen that gave his/her life for everything we enjoy.

HB: It's true. I know that in Haines, Alaska the liberals there are probably more densely situated than any where else. So, was the stigma because of those type of people who saw the war in a negative light or was it just everyone that did that?

DB: To a point, it was everybody. A lot of people say that it wasn't like World War II, and it wasn't like Korea. Everybody somehow treated them differently.

HB: Well, it wasn't like any of the other wars.

DB: No, it wasn't.

HB: France and Germany are completely different from Vietnam.

DB: And a lot of the old veterans say that they didn't win the war. It just hurt me. They weren't allowed to win.

HB: It still doesn't change the fact that awful things happened, that you had to do awful things. It doesn't matter if you win or not.

DB: Both sides were guilty of a lot of atrocities.

HB: How did Haines change? Did it change?

DB: We were lucky. You know, Southeast Alaska was so isolated that we weren't really in mainstream America at that time. Back then, think we're isolated now, back then we were isolated. By the time a new fad of a new song got to us, it had been out of the circuit in the lower forty-eight for five years. We didn't really suffer that bad.

HB: So, the only thing that really changed people was their view of the war, or their own experiences with it?

DB: Yeah.

HB: Was there anyone you knew of who resisted the draft?

DB: Yeah, there were several from Haines that ran to Canada.

HB: What was their reasoning for that?

DB: Well, I can't speak for them but I can speak what I heard. Sometimes rumors aren't really truthful and sometimes they have some basis in fact. The one person that I am talking about directly just didn't want to take the chance of getting killed. So, he left.

HB: I think I probably know who you are talking about.

DB: Yeah, I think you probably do.

HB: I am not sure if we can say his name.

DB: I know his dad was a hero in World War II in the Pacific. And it just killed his father.

HB: I bet it did. How were they treated when they came back?

DB: You know, he didn't come back until Carter, until Carter gave pardons to everybody. So he was in Canada for quite a while. I think he got a pardon in 1978 or 1979 or something. So he was gone for 10 or more years.

HB: So what would have happened if he had come back?

DB: He would have been arrested.

HB: So he was breaking the law.

DB: Right, he was drafted and ran.

HB: Oh really?

DB: Yes, so he would have been arrested.

HB: So if somebody went to Canada before they were drafted?

DB: A lot of people did go to Canada.

HB: But he actually resisted.

DB: He was actually drafted and he deserted.

HB: That's not very cool.

DB: No, but you don't know what was going on in his heart or in his mind. I know that there was always a big discussion in our house about drafting and the year I became of age, my mom said, "If he gets drafted, we're going to Canada. We're running to Whitehorse." I would say, "No, we're not, Mom." She'd say, "I'll make you go there, I'll force you to go there." And Dad would always look at her and say, "It's his decision." That was the end of discussion.

HB: So looking back, after all these years, has your view changed about the war?

DB: Not really, no. I still think that even though it was an unpopular war, I personally think that it was necessary. That country asked for our help and we had a binding agreement with them. And if you are not willing as a country to back up a treaty or an agreement, than what kind of country are you? It was a necessary evil. I know that it is not a popular thought today because all these armchair quarterbacks say, "Well, we shouldn't have done this." And I would say that they weren't there and they didn't know what was in the people's minds.

HB: Armchair quarterbacks?

DB: Yeah, those are people 20 years down the road say, "Hey, we could have done this, we could have done that." All that could have dones. They were ready to pass judgments and they weren't even involved.

HB: Do you wish that you were drafted?

DB: In a way, yeah. In a way, not. I'm the only one in my family that was never in a war. Everyone in my family, my father, grandfather, great-grand father, and all my uncles. I'm the only of the generations that was missed. I'm glad, because I'm not exactly a short guy. I'm sure I'd be an easy target.

HB: I know that it was Johnson who escalated the war, that it was him that kid of deceived the American people a little bit about the number of troops over there and how long it was going to last and such. But, how did the American view of his administration change because of that?

DB: I don't know so much that Johnson purposefully deceived. I think to a point that he may have been deceived. I think that it was so confusing and unorganized for so long over there, they didn't really know how many troops were over there. People did start looking at him as a war monger and he wasn't. I don't of any American President that has served his country, would enjoy sending his young men and his young women to their deaths. That's not a human trait, an acceptable human trait. I don't think any sitting President ever said – it's just a hard concept, I think.

HB: Do you think that people lost faith in the office of the President because of that?

DB: To a point, yeah.

HB: Do you think that Nixon did a good job of compacting the war?

DB: A lot of people don't like Richard Nixon, but I do. I think he did a lot of good for this country, I really do. I remember in my senior year in high school we had a mock court. The class sat as senators. No, my junior year, no my sophomore year and we were impeaching him. And I was one of the defense counselors. There were three defense attorneys. There was about 6 or 7 prosecutors that were against him big time and we actually won. We got the Senate, all 50 of them, to vote not guilty because of the evidence that we presented. We had to get everything out of Newsweek and out of Times and out of the papers. We proved him innocent.

HB: Really?

DB: Yeah.

HB: Wow.

DB: And then he wasn't impeached.

HB: Right, he resigned. That's funny, Dad. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you would like to share with me?

DB: It's not necessarily about the Vietnam War but its more like about U.S. serviceperson, personnel. They make it so glamorous. But its really not, it's very hard. You have to go through basic training. I wrestled, I was straight out of college when I joined the service when the town went bankrupt and I couldn't find a job. I was straight out of college, and I was probably 6'3" and maybe 235 and I had no neck. My arms were 22" and I was part hulk. I joined the service and they beat me to death. I remember when I got out of AIT, I was 215 pounds and I had a 34" waist. I thought, my legs used to be 34". It was very hard duty. I made \$258 a month. When I got out the service, I was making \$500 a month. They sent you everywhere. I went to Georgia, Texas, Alaska, Germany. They sent you everywhere. You just get accustomed to something and you get sent off somewhere else. It was a hard duty. It's still hard duty today because the armed forces are so small today that they are calling up the majority of the

National Guard to help defend this country. Our troops are so small in size. They have been down-sized for so many years that it's scary. There's not a lot of men and women today that can handle 16 weeks of training without quitting or going nuts.

HB: It's not 16 weeks anymore though, is it?

DB: Yeah, I think it is. I started basic in February, got out of AIT in June, so February to June was my training. But I was good at what I did. Most of your Alaskans were good because I was taught to shoot when I was five years old. I was shooting rabbits and ducks, ptarmigan, grouse, and everything when I was eight years old. My dad taught me how to survive in the woods, how to track an animal or track a human, how to live, what to eat, how to stay away from things. When I joined the service, I was always Point. I was in the jungle where snakes were and I hate snakes with a passion. They are so icky looking. I'd fight a brown bear in a heart beat before I'd go after a snake.

HB: You and Uncle Ken are the same.

DB: Oh, I just can't stand them. They're okay to look at behind a cage, but oh. They first time I came across a big copperhead, a water moccasin, I killed that thing with my machete. I wasn't going to take a chance, I cut its head off.

HB: Where were you at?

DB: I can't tell you.

HB: Really?

DB: You know why, because I have no idea where I was. All I remember is flying in a C-130, I fell asleep and I don't really remember how long the flight was. I had no concept where I was. I know that I was down south somewhere.

HB: So you were state side.

DB: I was state side. I know that there was a swamp, mosquitoes, snakes.

HB: I thought that it was going to be some exotic place.

DB: They did speak Portuguese or Spanish or something.

HB: I thought it was going to be Top Secret.

DB: The reason I can't tell you is because I didn't know where I was.

HB: Okay. I am going to stop the tape now. Thanks, Dad, for doing this. This was an interview with Dave Berry, who lived in Haines, Alaska, which is in Southeast Alaska, during the Vietnam War.