

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

G. Eric Haroldson – Life during Vietnam

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Oral Interview conducted by Tod Goelz

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TG: This is Tod Goelz from Eric Walz's History 300 class. I am interviewing Eric Haroldson, from Idaho Falls, Idaho, on the 19th of February 2004. Eric Haroldson, when and where were you born?

GH: I was born in Idaho Falls, March 31st, 1962.

TG: How old were you when the U.S. started fighting in the Vietnam War?

GH: Well, once the war was a little more official, after the Tonkin Resolution there, I was three, so I don't remember much.

TG: O.K. What was your understanding, why the Vietnam War was happening?

GH: Well my understanding at the time, through the late 60's and early 70's, well it was confusing. I had a mother who was something of a dove, and a father who was something of a hawk; so I was always trying to make sense of the, the war. It was clearly, explained to me the whole domino theory of Communism. My father was very clear on that. The communist spread must be stopped right there otherwise it would engulf all of Asia.

TG: What is your opinion of the Viet Kong now, as opposed to what it was then?

GH: (laughter)...Well I was trying to get a feel for who the Viet Kong were. I remember hearing the term Viet Kong, but it was always linked with that word gorilla, and of course being a child I was trying to figure out what the deal was with the guerilla there. I don't know if I ever actually thought they were monkeys. But the thought of gorillas, jungles, jumping the American troops there, I thought I must be confused here, they can't be, they can't be really some kind of gorilla out in the jungle, ooh-ooh-ooh, uh attacking our guys, of course leave it to the communists to think of that. But eventually I, I had to actually ask, and I remember asking my mom about this, I couldn't have been more than five or six at the time, I said, "what is the guerilla, are the communists really, working with that?" After all we used monkeys in the space program, I wasn't actually certain. That sounds dumb now, but uh, I finally got a pretty good clear idea. It was clearly stated that these were people who, don't care about life. I remember hearing that. I heard frequently the stories about, um Viet Kong, strapping bombs to themselves there, or worse still to their childrens, and then to the GIs or young women, and so of course I was, I immediately made up my mind that they were evil people. Now today, looking back, I don't know if I've changed a whole lot there. I know that they were zealot people. I am also aware that those who did blow up children were in the minority. A good lot of the Viet Kong never would have done that, but you can always have a zealot group in within a faction, and that you can't judge the entire group by simply that. So I'm a little more sympathetic, considering the fact now that I know that these people had had their land occupied by the French, then the Japanese, then the French again, and now apparently there's another invading army; the Americans dictating what kind of government they should have. I can see that I would, in their position, be irritated, and so I'm a little bit more sympathetic certainly.

TG: Great. Did you have a father or a brother who served in the war?

GH: No. No my father was, uh, much too old for that. He was trained to be a fighter pilot in World War II. The war ended before he saw service, however I, I'm the youngest of a large family, and my three older brothers, one was 13 years, one was 11 and one was 8 years older than myself, so they graduated all in the late 60's and one in 1972. They were all of age that they could have gone off to fight. But because we are a family of university people there, going off to college did diminish their chance of going to the draft. In addition of course um, all three of my brothers served missions right through that time period. I'm not quite sure politically what role that had, but apparently it, it meant that there was less chance of them serving. But it was always hanging over our head. I remember there were times when, I'm not sure if this is correct, but I remember times where they were reading out, general batches of drafted people numbers, and my mom would have these cards in her hand, I guess they must have had my brothers draft numbers. They didn't actually read specifically the numbers, but they named groups, and I remember seeing my mother, listening to the radio, holding those cards with her hands trembling. Then that was a very vivid thing for me.

TG: So was your, was your mother uh, how did your mother feel about the draft as a whole, or how did you feel towards the draft?

GH: Well clearly my mom being the dove of the family, and that's relative to her father she wasn't totally against the war. But um, when it came to the war she had one idea but when it came to her sons, she modified that and definitely became more anti-war knowing that it could take her boys certainly. I was, um, I don't remember being that concerned about my brothers going off to fight. I kind of assumed that it would eventually happen after all this was a war that was my whole life it was already brewing before I was even born and I remember when I was about 9, 10, 11 or so still believing that the chances of me fighting in the war were a possibility. After all, the war that had gone on my whole life I presumed it would continue on. I would eventually see service somewhere right around 1980-81 or so.

TG: Wow so what would you say are some of the most vivid memories of the Vietnam experience that stand out in your mind?

GH: Among the things that I can think of that were especially vivid is, uh, I remember seeing images, video images of seven Buddhist priest burning themselves alive back in 1963. Now, I didn't see them at the time I was too young, but I saw them later on it's images of bald men, Buddhist priest there in their orange robes with flames orange flames billowing off their faces and the gas can sitting beside and the box of matches and I was just shocked at the image and I talked to my father about it and he said, "what's the situation here, why did they do this?" And from his point of view he said look they are a bunch of kooks any body who would do that deserve to be listened to. And of course it was later on that I found out that they were only protesting, not so much the Americans but the oppressive government of President Diem who was admittedly a jerk. Uh that

was one image that really stood out for me. And of course this is uncensored television so we would see this on the evening news and they didn't hold back a whole lot we'd see people with their legs blown away and them doing some immediate surgery right on them after they slipped on a bouncing betty or something. And, I wasn't a kid who of course, likes to watch the news very much but anytime there was something about the war I would kind of perk up and watch what was going on there. And I got the impression that my folks were kind of looking for ways to shoo me away from this, but they didn't actually do it outright.

TG: Wow, wow, so you talked about protesters and the Buddhist priest, overall what did you think of those who resisted the drafting process?

GH: Well, I was aware of what was going on at Berkley and Kent State a little bit of the time and of course and the story things of people going off to Canada. I remember for the most part thinking that they were a bunch of cowards at the time. Especially the ones that went to Canada. To me it was just kind of like they were abandoning their own nation unwilling to stand up for uh the freedoms that we enjoy, help other people retain the same.

TG: Ok, so what do you remember of the other violence in the country out of hand protest or ghetto fires?

GH: Well, I was into music at the time and crusades steal nation young came out with a song, "Ohio" which is about the Kent State massacre and the four people that were killed there I was interested in that that kind of perked me up. I wasn't quite aware at the time it happened until I heard the song then I went back and started asking questions about that. And because of that it kind of heightened my interest in other things and I started looking back at some of the events of '68 which was a really catacosmic time there and uh with all the protest things going on outside the democratic convention for example in '68 and of course all the assassinations going on it seems like everybody was getting shot of course it was just Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King that year but it just seemed like everything was falling apart. And I remember very clearly thinking the worlds not going to last a whole lot longer. And somehow I took some comfort in that. I thought all right I don't have to worry about college.

TG: Even in Idaho then?

GH: Uh, yeah. I just figured this is going to be a global meltdown. I tried to convince my father this was a good excuse not to mow the lawn.

TG: (Laughter)

GH: What's the point in mowing the lawn if the worlds ending all around us. And certainly the evening news seemed to suggest that was happening. So it seems awful at this point in my life to look back and think that I was shocked and I was a little bit

excited at the time because it was interesting it was confusing but interesting because I wasn't in dismay that much I was just fascinated with it actually.

TG: Wow, so if you would have to guess when did you first recognize the growing anti-war sentiment in America?

GH: About 1970 I was 8 years old at the time that's um everything seemed to be falling apart in 1970 the whole '60's counter cultures falling apart there we heard that the Beatles were breaking up there the same year that Jimmy Hendrix and Janice Joplin both die a year later or so. And I was into the music as I mentioned and uh I found that the more I was interested in the music the um more my folks tried to uh keep us from listening to that music there. We were listening to uh various songs there and I noticed the ones definitely that my folks tried to help us uh dodge were the ones that I was particularly interested in for that very reason without looking at what was wrong with these some of these songs there. And of course um much of it was protesting war itself and uh right about this time it became very popular among kids to um wear the broken cross, the peace symbol. Uh most of the kids had it somewhere on their, their clothing there I remember getting a pair, buying a pair of tennis shoes that were made of American flags and my mom was of course was very upset with that my sister started putting up peace symbols in her room just because it was cool. And uh I clearly saw that my folks were upset over all of this and that we were apparently caught u pin the protest of the war and they still let us do it I'm amazed, my folks were rather strict but I guess because of their they were torn over it themselves they were so assertive in condemning us for these things and so we kind of uh got away with an awful lot there.

TG: So would you say that um how would you say uh the culture was did they did most of them go along with the anti-war sentiment because it was what everyone was doing or were did they did they was the feeling of the people for real reasons of why they were against the war? Does that make sense?

GH: Uh-huh. Well it's a mixed lot certainly. I think a lot of people using the counter culture as an excuse for hedonism selfishness there. There was little doubt about that we saw um kind of two classes of people took me a while to distinguish them because they both looked kind of the same. They were the hippies and then there were the student protesters and they were really the same people at all. Student protested were those who were intent in the feelings and of course they grew the beards and looked very hippish but they tend to be on college campuses there. And they were very organized with the rallies but the hippies themselves were interesting to me but I saw them as disgusting bums. That they were just out there to take advantage of the situation say that they were protesting the war and society and therefore they were rejecting all the values of conventions of marriage and getting a job and whatnot. But um I tend to agree with my father they were just kind of bums. They just needed to get a job we saw them frequently. There was a highway near my home and we would go down and swim the creek (crick?) and underneath the bridge the highway bridge we would see hippies camping out who were hitchhiking across the country. And we'd see them there and, and their filth and they were disgusting and uh so we would often draw in mud on the walls of

the inside of the bridge underneath because as we waited in mud we'd draw pictures in mud of these hippies making fun of them and, and calling them a bunch of bums that ought to go and get a job. But uh so I, I defiantly see some that were genuine and some that were definitely milking this for whatever they could for selfish purposes.

TG: O.K. looking overall at the leadership of the nation what do you think the leadership provided by the presidents in office during the war, and why?

GH: Well, I don't remember Kennedy of course he died when I was about 18 months old there. And many people of course speculated that if he lived he would have not gotten engaged in the war. I'm not sure if I believe that entirely there. Johnson the first president that I really remember there I was trying to make sense of him and I found him very confusing there because he seemed to be very conservative for a democrat that is there. But he definitely appeared to me to be a guy who didn't want to be the first American President to lose a war. And so he was trying all kinds of methods that clearly to me seemed very feeble. He tried to escalate the war operation rolling thunder and then he saw that that wasn't going very well so they started working on this Vietnamization that I did have one appreciation it was kind of a shock for us when Johnson didn't run for the presidency in '68 there. And I got wondering why, you know why wouldn't you want that everybody else wants to be president as long as they can and but it's a now win situation catch 22. No matter what he does he's going to look bad with this war pulling out continuing and so I had an appreciation, and any man who gets out while he can I think I would have done the same. And of course Nixon comes in and my family being conservative, my family we were my family voted for Nixon there. And of course he escalated the war into Cambodia and lost a little bit there and uh as he did this and had little success in doing so and along with the stories about American troops being held at the Hanoi Hilton? And places like that and he was, it was upsetting. I started to wonder if their guy really knew what he was doing because he seemed to go one direction hit a wall then go another direction and so from point of view at the time I was still kind of loyal to him until Watergate, but I remember having some concerns but you understand I was only 10, 12 or so at the time and most of this is going on but when I look back, it hasn't really changed a whole lot there, but Nixon was like Johnson, a president who didn't want to lose there trying to find some way of peace with honor, but it's pretty hard for the Americans to admit any defeat there and even if he wasn't the guy who started the war. He was the guy who had to end it and take the blame so I have some sympathy for his miserable situation there.

TG: Hmm, Wow, so when would you say that you, when did you think the war was over?

GH: Well we had already had some things that looked like you know cease fires there so in about '73 you know, it looked pretty promising. I remember when they talked about a cease fire it was right in there I can't remember if we had a few false starts or not there but I remember we had one it must have been close to the real end and I remember actually commenting because like a day or two before President Truman had died I remember thinking would it be, no wasn't it too bad that he died before he got to hear that the war was apparently winding down. I wasn't sure I totally believed that really

was the end, but of course it really wasn't. It was sort of for the Americans when we first saw those American POW's arriving I remember them coming off the airplanes I was watching this live on television it had to be '60 or '73 and back then before they had the connecting tunnels to the airport they actually saw them walking down the staircase across the pavement there. And I actually saw one guy drop to his knees and kiss the pavement, nasty dirty pavement there but it was very moving when I realized what this guy had been through. And we saw other troops running through and of course meeting their families there and that was really moving. And it all seemed good but of course the war continued until '75 and uh once again we had images near the end there in April of '75 with the fall of Saigon to see all those people try to break through the gates trying to get out at that time we saw this on television on the news there and to see the Americans the whole presence there pulling out there taking off in helicopters it was heartbreaking at the time just thinking, aw is this the way it ends? And to see off in the distance the um the North Vietnamese flag there the big yellow star on the red and white or yellow. Red and blue background being waved as our last soldiers or not soldiers our last diplomats and correspondents were pulled out and a few selected Vietnamese people. It was I think we were all just kind of had our heads down between our knees trying to absorb what an awful shameful moment at least that's what it seemed at the time.

TG: Sure, so how in your mind do you think the vet, how were the returning veterans treated after the war?

GH: Well, we had a guy who I believe he's still around somewhere. His name is Captain Larry Chessley, lives down in Burley, Idaho, and when he got back he's the only one I actually knew directly and he wrote a book called Seven years in Hanoi about his experiences there and he came around and did talks, firesides to a lot of the wards around these parts here, I even have a recording of him still, of him describing his experiences now I realize that some of these people were protested as being a bunch of baby killers there reason why they were captured was because they were pilots bombing Hanoi and many people were of course very away of Jane Fonda was up to at that time with her protest there but from our local point of view we hated Jane Fonda or as we used to say we were not Fonda Jane. (laughter)

TG: (laughter)

GH: and so I was sympathetic to the returning people but especially after hearing Captain Chessley describe his situation of all that he had been through. It made me all the more sympathetic to them and proud of them to see what these hit. Guys had gone through some of them had the opportunity to leave early if they had cooperated and then the propaganda for the, for the north but they refused and um that became very obvious to me at the time.

TG: Uh-huh. So this is sort of a two-part question, first how did your religious beliefs help you cope with their military experience and as a result of the Vietnam War how did your life change?

GH: Well, from a religious point of view at the time what I was thinking at the time.

TG: At the time?

GH: At the time it is clear to us that, communists were a bunch of heathens and that they were atheist they had no respect for religion or the family this was, we heard stories and it was only confirmed later on for example some of the things that were going on in Cambodia with Pol Pot breaking up families and whatnot, but we had already heard stories along those lines going back to Stalin's time. And so for the most part we saw communism an enemy to the family and to religion and so that kind of heightened their zeal a little bit about fighting in there and therefore supporting the war in spite of the many things that weren't going right and that the government of South Vietnam was not exactly the most incorruptible government it's kind of picking the lesser of the two evils and supporting it but after the war was over there I suppose for the most part it made me and people like myself much more cautious about committing to some kind of military engagement. You see from my fathers generation the war seem very clear black and white terms but after watching the Vietnam War, I saw it in many shades of gray that on the one hand this on the other hand that and so life became more complicated the world became more difficult to comprehend after seeing the Vietnam War and its miserable ending.

TG: Great did you know any young man that didn't return from the war? From your experience from any of your brothers friends, or any people from the community of Idaho Falls that didn't return?

GH: Uh no, not specifically I had my brothers who had a bunch of friends that went off to Vietnam. I don't know of any that didn't come back. Some of those that came back, came back very weird. My brother had a roommate at BYU-Provo for example and he went by the title "Sarge" and he couldn't give it up there and he was paranoid sleep with a pistol under his pillow, and uh under his pillow there and I thought he was a very colorful guy. I always wanted him to tell me stories of what was going on there. But, no I, I didn't actually personally know anybody that didn't come back, but I got a thing directly from these all these people whether they were talking about some of their friends blown away and described the different kinds of land mines which seemed to be the thing that freaked them out more than anything. They described the difference between clay mores and bouncing Betties and what not and they described them almost in funny terms to me as if it was amusing to them but when you look in their eyes and see that it was just kind of haunting thing they were just trying to make light of what was bothering them.

TG: Wow, well great the last question that I have before we end the interview is you spoke a little bit about Jane Fonda and Hanoi Jane as she would often be referred to even today. Looking at the media, what do you recall about the movies that were being made at the time on the Vietnam War and even after the war? How would you, what do you recall about them?

GH: Well as far as the movies, now the movies at the time we didn't after that other than Disney films there. But I remember a couple at the time that were particularly unusual. For example one of the movies that came out at the time was "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." I know your thinking what does that have to do with the Vietnam. It actually has a lot to do with Vietnam where it actually has a kind of anti hero going on where actually your rooting for these, these guys the bad guys. It's kind of like turning the values up on their head there and I thought a lot of people found that disturbing. I thought it was a hoot actually. Another film that came out right about that time was "Easy Rider." This is a peace film of all people interesting that and it was had Jack Nicholson in it I haven't seen it for so long, but it was kind of this carefree thing of people who just want to live peacefully, they don't want war or anything like that and, and that people can go about their daily lives and be peaceful and just cruise in their motorcycles there and run around and, and I thought it was and interesting moving, but the ending just about left me a basket case because of course if you haven't seen this the ending some people come by with a shotgun and blow them away right off of their motorcycles and it pretty much ends about there.

TG: (laughter)

GH: I'm going ohhhh.

TG: (laughter)

GH: You know it's basically peace on earth but look at all this ties in to a song that was really popular at the time by Simon and Garfunkle it's called, Silent Night Seven O'clock News. We had this beautiful song, melodic song, just the carol to the savior and you hear this seven o'clock news rising as it talks about the Vietnam War and it gets louder and louder until it just pretty much obliterates the beauty of the song you know, there is no peace on earth, they said that type of thing. There were also movies that were indirectly part of this, um; one of the movies that we saw at the time was called Silent Running. Once again, more of this peaceful thing that we're trying to save, people and their, their environment. It was a very ecological movie about the last plants on earth get shipped out into space, and put on little greenhouses out in space, and eventually the people decide to blow them up, and ah, many people say that it's kind of a modern American point of view of destroying anything that actually has value of letting these people live their lives in peace and harmony. The only other thing I can think of along those lines is, the most popular television series, that I recall at the time was called, The Prisoner. It was a short run television series there, from England there, but it was extremely political. Ah, all the symbolism there, of people are being turned into numbers, and whatnot, and freedoms being taken away. By the time I wasn't very sure whether it was actually protesting the war or in favor of the war but it seemed to be a very pacifist suggestion all through it there. So I think for the most part it was protesting the war, and my folks were a little uncomfortable, but it was so symbolic it was hard to tell what was going on. I really only remember watching it because my older brother said, "It was really cool" and I wanted to be cool. But I do remember the closing episode of that series, the end of the whole series. It ends with thermal nuclear, des, you know war there, and ah

Armageddon. Again, it left us a little bit blown away that; what are we doing to ourselves? Maybe we should let people live in peace, and if the Vietnamese want to be communist, just let it be.

TG: Well great, well ah, Grant Eric, thanks for doing this interview, and this concludes our interview.