

Eric Walz History 300 Collection

Steven R. Brown- Life During Vietnam

By Steven R. Brown

February 17, 2004

Box 4 Folder 6

Oral Interview conducted by Shelby L. Crain

Transcript copied by Luke Kirkham February 2005

Brigham Young University - Idaho

A discussion about Vietnam. An interview with Steven Brown done by Shelby Crain. Interview done in Rexburg, ID on February 17, 2004.

SC: Okay I just have a few questions today about Vietnam. How old were you about when the war started?

SB: Um, my earliest recollections of the war were probably in the early 60's, I was born in '49 so I was about 15, 14, 13, right in that area.

SC: So about when it ended?

SB: It ended in what, '75, '74 something in that neighborhood. So when it ended I would have been 25, 24, 25 years old.

SC: Um, what was it like, what was the feeling like back here in the United States during the war?

SB: There was a lot of, a lot of diverse feelings. The protesters were actively involved throughout the country. Veterans were almost ashamed to have been veterans. Veterans of the war, people in the military were shunned. ROTC groups on university campuses were looked down upon, even spit upon, as they walked around schools. I grew up in California during the Vietnam War, later moved to Idaho to go to college, but California was even, a lot, tougher because you had Berkeley University in which was a strong anti-war area, uh most of the Bay Area was, Northern California. And so it was a country strongly divided. You were either for it or against it. You didn't find a lot of people who were in the middle of the road.

SC: Was there a big difference in living in California then when you came to Idaho?

SB: Yes, the war was starting to wind down when I came to Idaho. I came here to go to Idaho State University in Pocatello, and the ROTC was still a pretty active group on campus and there wasn't a lot of anti feelings. There were some, in fact I remember being told, 'cause I joined ROTC when I got here, so I remember being told that we weren't supposed to wear our uniforms down on campus. Just because, we, you know, just for whatever reason. There was a few people that were really anti United States or anti war I guess as much as anything.

SC: How did the war affect life in the States? Did it have an affect on movies and music, entertainment, those types of things?

SB: I don't remember movies off the top of my head. I know the music changed. We had Joan Biaz and a few other anti-war artists that sang a lot of anti-Vietnam or anti-US type songs. You had Jane Fonda. She was very much anti-war, I won't say she was anti-United States, but those who were pro administration and pro-United States felt she was anti-United States, not just anti-war. And she had an influence from the entertainment

industry. I specifically can't remember a lot of the movies going on at the that time but I remember the music. There was a lot of anti-war music.

SC: According to your understanding, what were America's goals in the war?

SB: The biggest thing that we were told was that it was to stop the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. That if we let Vietnam fall, then Cambodia'd fall, Laos, etc., etc., etc. Not sure that that was totally correct now as we look at history, but that's what we were told back then.

SC: Did anyone close to you fight?

SB: I had several friends that went to Vietnam, one that didn't come home. After I joined the military, most of the people that were older than me, already in the military, had been in Vietnam.

SC: Were any of them drafted?

SB: My friends that were my age, they were all drafted.

SC: What were your feelings about the drafting process?

SB: Um, I never, I never felt like if I were drafted that I would not go. The draft was just a part of our life. The draft was, was common throughout, for years and years and years. So all of knew that the draft was out there, and even without a war on, a lot of people were drafted to fill the military. It was just a part of what we thought we would end up doing sometime in our lives. So I wasn't anti- the draft. I knew that when the lottery came out, I happened to be on a mission at the time that the lottery came out, and my draft number that year would have been number nine, and so I would have been drafted that year, but I had a religious deferment because I was on a mission.

SC: Were the people that you knew that fought that came back, were they very different when they came back?

SB: Not my friends that I remembered. I don't remember them being changed. I know a lot of people who served in Vietnam, but I didn't know them before Vietnam, and they were, had some real emotional baggage after coming home. They suffered a lot of post-war syndrome, or whatever they, I can't remember what they called it now, but the struggled and a lot of them went through different kinds therapies, and some of them were on prescription medication to try to deal with their experience in Vietnam.

SC: What about people that resisted the draft? What did you think about that?

SB: I was an extremely patriotic teenager, and I still am. I didn't look very favorably on anybody who resisted the draft or protested the war. I could understand not agreeing with the war. I could understand fighting legislation, or doing whatever, to try to get us to pull

out, but I didn't understand the destruction of property, the wanton, just you know, protesting where businesses were destroyed or people lives were hurt, or people were hurt or even killed in some cases. That I didn't understand. I didn't understand going to Canada or those who went to Canada, I woulda had a rough time pardoning them as our president did after the war was over.

SC: Did they go to Canada to escape the draft?

SB: A lot of people went to Canada.

SC: So would say that you were pro war?

SB: I don't think anybody's pro war.

SC: Well, yeah.

SB: But uh, pro the United States, pro the line that we were given about, you know, protecting the innocent people, the reasons we needed to be there to stop the spread of communism. I was pro that. I think since then history has proven that perhaps our motives over there weren't as noble as I thought they were, and that's a little frustrating to me. I'm still very patriotic and pro-United States, pro-military, but I'd like a little more truth in government before we enter into a situation.

SC: When did you first recognize the growing anti-war sentiment in America?

SB: Oh, when I was in high school, you 14, 15, sophomore, junior, senior years. It was obvious. It was all around us. The Bay Area was a favorite hang out of the Hippie Movement, and that was, you know, just the whole atmosphere of Northern California, around the college campuses and stuff was all anti, anti-war.

SC: How did those anti-war sentiments affect your feelings on what was going on?

SB: They didn't bother me at all, in fact I was so pro-United States and pro, at that time, President Johnson even though I don't know if I was a democrat or republican back then, but I just didn't think my government would lie to me, and I was a little naïve perhaps, but I still never felt and still today don't feel that violent protesting is the way to achieve anything, and I just saw them out on the streets, you know, throwing rocks or Molotov cocktails at police and all that kind of stuff. I just thought that was totally wrong.

SC: Did you think that President Johnson did a good job while he was president with the war?

SB: During the time, sure. During the time, I thought again, like I was saying, I was naïve enough to think that my government wouldn't lie to me. History now, looks back and says, you know, he was politically motivated in certain areas. The biggest frustration I felt even as I got into my early 20's was the fact that it was a political war, not a

military war, and after I joined the army and was on active duty I, in studying the history of the war, I realized even more and more and more, that we could have won the war very easily as far as the military, if the military would have been allowed to do their job, but it was a political war, and we lost a lot of men and women over there because of politics and not because of our inability to fight an enemy.

SC: Do you feel that President Nixon did anything better than President Johnson?

SB: Uh, Nixon got in towards the end of that and so he just became the hero because he brought everybody home. I mean it was losing cause. By the time Nixon got in there was no way we were going to win because we didn't have the will to win within the United States. We had the capability to win within the military, but the will wasn't there so Nixon's only alternative was to take the troops out. So I don't know if he did anything better.

SC: So, um, did you feel that the military was engaging in the best possible strategy to bring the end of the war?

SB: Heavens no. They, we were limited on where we could shoot, we were limited on where we could bomb, we almost telegraphed our times, we almost had to tell them in advance where we were going to patrol so that there wouldn't be anybody there. No we weren't even closely allowed to fight a military campaign. It was a political campaign, for political reasons which I still probably don't even understand today.

SC: Do you remember the massacre at My Lai?

SB: I remember it, with Lt. Calley, yeah.

SC: What was the feeling after that in the United States? How did people react?

SB: I think those that were against the war continued to react and feeling justified because the evil United States was over there committing atrocities on innocent civilians. So I don't know that it, I can't remember that it changed anything. It didn't change my opinion of the war in general. Every war there are certain individuals or certain commanders that choose to destroy innocent lives. I still am not sure whether Lt. Calley was the only one to blame for that. I think that there's probably more involved than even what has ever come out, but I don't know.

SC: Do you think that Lt. Calley was, do you think it was fair that he was tried for murder?

SB: You know, I think so if in fact he, and he never did blame anybody else if I remember right, and I don't remember the story completely, but sure. Military people have to be, in a country like ours, in a country that believes in freedom and justice, and all of the things we stand for, even our military has to be held to strict rules, even in war.

We're not allowed to just go kill anybody for any reason. So he should be tried and held accountable, but I'm not sure that there shouldn't have been others too.

SC: What were your feelings about the final peace settlement?

SB: I see, I'm trying to remember what I felt like then. I was relieved then because I was then in ROTC at Idaho State University and planning on, you know, at least a part-time career in the military for a few years. I wasn't planning on spending 20, but I was going to go for a while, I figured I'd be going to Vietnam and I wanted to go as an officer versus and enlisted soldier. So I was glad that the peace accord came. I think that we basically gave away the store. I mean we deserted a lot of people who were good to us in Vietnam, and on our side, and a lot of those people were killed when the communist regime, all of them came into the south and into Saigon, and you know, a lot of people were killed. That's a part of the United States and I'm not sure that we were, you know, we got a few of the key generals and probably a few thousand others. I don't know how many we got out of Vietnam, but we left a lot of people there, and that's just, I don't know. I think that developed a distrust around the world for the United States that we don't stand by our friends.

SC: What do you remember most about Vietnam and what happened?

SB: I don't know. Probably the biggest thing that I remember is the nightly news broadcast. I mean every night it was on the TV. You know those visual footage of the war and the amount of Americans being killed, and it was a pretty anti-Vietnam atmosphere on the news. They weren't just reporting the war, they were reporting the negatives of war and there was a lot of really terrible negatives of war, and that's the reason war shouldn't be entered into unless it's an absolutely necessity.

SC: How were returning veterans treated after the war?

SB: Uh, they were treated terribly. They were treated terribly for years. One of my friends came home, got off the airplane in San Francisco and the people as he walked through the airport spat on him, you know, threw stuff at him. Most of these soldiers, they came home as ones and twos, they didn't come home as a whole unit. They didn't go over as a unit and come back. It was just soldiers. I mean one day you were in Vietnam and the next moment you were home, and being treated like you were some kind of criminal. Vietnam veterans never did get the respect they deserve until just in the last few years, maybe the last eight to ten years they started giving them some respect for what they did while they were over there.

SC: Do you think that's because the people back in the states didn't understand what they had to go through?

SB: Oh I'm sure they didn't understand what they went through, but there was just a hatred. There was a hatred that had built up in our country, a distrust of government, and a hatred for military people that it didn't matter whether you were returning from

Vietnam, or whether you were stationed here in the United States. Just an animosity that I thought was all around. An anti-military animosity.

SC: Did you talk to any of your friends that had fought about how they were treated when they got home? Did they ever tell you?

SB: Other than that one story, that one guy that I knew, I haven't talked to any of the others.

SC: Did you see a lot of drug use among people during Vietnam back in the states?

SB: Again, I lived in the Bay Area. Drugs were very prevalent in the 60's. You know Haight Ashbury in San Francisco, the whole scene. Some of my friends, even in the church, got into drugs very heavily. Still even with all the drug use, it wasn't an accepted pastime by the majority of the people. I mean today it seems to be more just accepted, oh yeah, I tried marijuana, like no big deal. Back then not everybody tried marijuana. I mean there were obviously those who used it, or even stronger drugs, but it wasn't as accepted as it is today.

SC: Did you hear very much about soldiers using drugs while they were in Vietnam?

SB: Yeah, and I only know that from news reports and novels that I've read, not fictional, but non-fictional novels. And histories, I've studied a lot of military history. So yeah there was a lot of drug usage, and that's the only way a lot of guys coped with being over there.

SC: Has Vietnam had any affect on the way that you look at things now, or the government, those types of things?

SB: I think Vietnam, if it hasn't had an affect on every person in the United States; they were blind, that lived through it. I still want to trust that my government does the right things for the right reasons, but it's very difficult because Vietnam was one of those occasions in which they didn't do the right things for the right reasons, or maybe the right reason was there, but that's not the reason they did it. I think that makes sense. I just, I've grown more skeptical of government. Politics today are so terrible; it's not even enjoyable to watch the nightly news. I'm still very conservative. I'm very patriotic. I still, you know, the military was a great career for me. I enjoyed the military. It's a good, we have a great military in many ways, but we need to watch our government, else we don't deserve to be free.

SC: If we could go back, if the country could go back and do Vietnam over again, what do you think would be in our best interest? Like how do you think we could change it for the better? Obviously we can't go back, but...

SB: If we were going to fight in Vietnam again, we'd need to turn it over to the generals and let them win the war. It'd be much like Iraq and some others. Vietnam was a little

bit different situation because of how entrenched the communists were in the North, but we could have easily, well maybe it wouldn't have been as easy, but much easier than what we did over there, we could have won if the military would have been in charge and not the politicians. It would have lasted far shorter, and we would have lost far fewer American lives. So if we're going to fight a war we just need to let the military fight the war and not the politicians. That would have been a good change. It would have happened quick and maybe we wouldn't have had time for it to fester and have so many anti-war protestors that grew in the early 70's, late 60's, I'm sorry. Maybe even mid 60's to early 70's. It would have just been quick.

SC: Is there anything else you'd like to share about Vietnam that you remember? Any experiences that you heard from other people?

SB: Nope, the soldiers that I know personally that have served in Vietnam for the most part those who were in combat areas, some were in the rear areas, and didn't face the combat areas, it was a hell and they felt like their hands were tied most of the time. It was a frustration for them. A lot of them came back carrying that baggage with them. I can't think of anything else really.