Lyle Wakefield – Life during Vietnam

By Lyle Wakefield

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Oral Interview conducted by Shelly Gordon

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Brigham Young University – Idaho
SG: Can you please tell me your name?

LW: Lyle Wakefield.

SG: Where were you born?

LW: Camp Carson, Colorado.

SG: Colorado, and what was your birth date, what is your birthday?

LW: January 16, 1952.

SG: How old were you when the Vietnam conflict started? Around, age?

LW: I… I would have been either high school or college-age or mission age… 19, 18, 19…

SG: So, late teens?

LW: Late teens.

SG: How did you find out about the start of the conflict? Did you hear it on the news, did you hear it through a friend?

LW: Would have probably been through some television and friends probably.

SG: Probably? And can you describe to me… do you remember your initial reaction? What thoughts might have crossed through your head? If you thought maybe it was, maybe a joke the way some thought of September 11th?

LW: No I remember it as being real. I remember that it was pretty important to me at least because it meant that I might be drafted to go. So, because of that, I was worried about whether I would have to go or not. My father served in the Military just briefly when, right after his mission, and uh, just about the time my parents were married, in fact, that was why I was born in Camp Carson, Colorado, was because my parents were there. My dad was stationed there. He only served two years and was not involved in any war. But, I was pretty concerned about it, and really didn’t have a desire to go and to be drafted. So, I wondered how I would manage that. And there were also times when, in the church, because of some Vietnam, the church was only allowed to call certain numbers of… so many missionaries from a certain ward. There was like a, a quota. And there were times when that was in place and times when that was off and on. So they can only take, so if you had ten available, you could only take six. So that four had to be available to serve in the military. But I do not remember the specifics about all of that in terms of the numbers necessary, but I do remember that as being an issue. And, you know, the question was, you know, would I fit in the quota, would I be able to go or not. So that was an important issue for me there.
SG: Were there like, certain, like, did they ask for certain types of people to serve or…

LW: No, just if you were 18 you were ready… had to register for the draft, of course. Mandatory registration and then they would draft you. And then about… I can’t remember exactly how it came about, but, I turned 19 in ’71, and at that point I had a draft number of 54. And are you familiar with how that, how that numbers come about?

SG: Not at all.

LW: What they did was they, well, in a matter of speaking, they took all the days of the year and put them in a hat and drew them out. So, the first one they drew out had a number of 1. That meant that all those young, all the men age 19, who had a birthday on that day, they had a draft number of 1. Then the next day they pulled out they gave a number 2. And then that’s the way it went.

SG: Wow.

LW: So January 16th was about number 54. So what that meant was that was a random of, or fair way really, of drafting as many as they needed and knowing which people to draft. So they started drafting all the number ones; everyone who had number one was drafted, number 2, number 3, whatever. Worked their way up until they had enough people to fill the quota. I do remember that being on my mission, that I knew that I had a draft number of 54, and I do remember that had I not been on my mission, I would have been drafted. But exactly when I got the number, I don’t know, whether it was after my mission or before I went.

SG: And can you explain how you register? Do you go kinda like voting registration?

LW: It’s much like that. There’s a form you have to fill out to indicate your birthday, social security number, where you live, where you’re from, where you were born; all the data that would be on a birth certificate essentially. Today, young men register, they can do it online, but of course, we had to go down to the courthouse.

SG: Oh, down to the courthouse?

LW: Down to the courthouse. And fill out the paperwork, and then that paperwork would be submitted to the nation, or wherever they kept track of all those records. That’s the way they did that.

SG: And how did you know, like, where to go, when to go register, who told you?

LW: The schools, like they do today. You know, they start advertising, particularly to senior boys who were turning eighteen.

SG: In high school?
LW: Yeah, at high school. You need to register by age 18; make sure that on your birthday that you register. Typically that’s when it was. And how did they make sure that all the 18…

SG: That everybody registered?

LW: Yeah.

SG: And was there a consequence for those who didn’t that you know of?

LW: In a way there was because I think that somehow the state knew, I mean, they have records of people’s birth dates and a record of them living in the state. Then they would know that somebody had turned 18 and hadn’t registered for the draft. And I do remember that there were people that dodged the draft by trying to go to Mexico or go to Canada; get out of the states. People that did not want to serve, did not want to be drafted, I remember that being an issue and hearing about that quite a bit. Never contemplated doing that, but I didn’t… but at the same time I didn’t have the courage to serve either.

SG: Really?

LW: Yeah.

SG: Just to back track, what branch of the military was your dad in?

LW: He was in the infantry.

SG: The infantry?

LW: Yeah, ended up doing… oh, ended up in Greenland or Iceland, one of the two…

SG: Wow.

LW: For a length of time, building bridges and doing a few things like that. In fact, I was, I can’t remember if I was born while he was gone, or if he got back just before I was born. You know, it was those typical kinds of stories of people in the military.

SG: Wow. And so you were in Colorado when you found out about the war?

LW: Actually I was born in Colorado, and then my parents moved back to Utah and we went to school there, my dad went to school there at BYU. And then moved to Wyoming. So I was in Lander, Wyoming, when I was… for all my school days; from the time I was in first grade through 19, when I left on my mission.

SG: How big of a town was that?

LW: About 5,000.
SG: About 5,000? Were there a lot of kids your age… growing up?

LW: We had a high school that had about nine hundred students in grades 9-12, so it was a fairly good sized high school. It was next to the Indian reservation. My father actually taught in the Indian reservation. So…

SG: That’s cool. Let’s see… I just have to ask this… did you serve in the conflict?

LW: No.

SG: And you said that you found out about the draft through school and advertisement?

LW: Mm hmmm.

SG: What… how did you feel when you found out that you were actually going to be serving a mission instead of serving in the conflict?

LW: Well, like I said, I was relieved because I would much prefer, well for two reasons; one, because I didn’t have the courage to go serve, I didn’t want to do that; and two, I wanted to serve a mission. So for those two reasons I was glad that I was able to go.

SG: And what was like, your family’s reaction when the war started? Not about you… not about the possibility of you serving in the war, but about their feelings, like your parents’ feelings towards the conflict itself?

LW: My parents were both very conservative. Probably would have… I can’t remember who the president was at that time, if it was…

SG: Kennedy?

LW: It was probably…

SG: Johnson?

LW: Yeah, somewhere in there, and I don’t know. I don’t remember discussing politics with my parents. They’re not really politically minded or majorly involved in that way at all. You know the Vietnam War was extremely controversial.

SG: Yeah.

LW: It was very, very controversial because, I mean, the things that we heard about were soldiers running out of ammunition and trying to be a police force with no way of doing that, having to say to the Vietnam, to leave, but no way of forcing them to leave, and atrocities that supposedly happened and reports. Of course, the immediacy of it is nowhere near what we have today. So, you know, things would have come much more
slower, although television and newspaper… there were reporters there and people were aware of what was happening, but it was not a favored war at all. Many people in the United States did not support it.

SG: Of course.

LW: And it was a police action, but it wasn’t a police action. It’s kind of like the Korean War: you weren’t supposed to say Communist; that was the wrong thing to say. So, you know, you couldn’t say you were fighting the Communists, you had to say North Korea, and the Vietnam War really was an extension of that same way. So the attitudes were pretty much the same, and there were a lot of protests about it. I remember the protests in the colleges, and college students protesting about Vietnam, and not wanting to go and concerned about what was happening there and, you know, how the men were being treated and the things that were going on, and so, it was in the news a lot.

SG: How was your… what was your family’s, mainly your parents reaction when they found out that you would be going on a mission instead of going over to Vietnam? Were they relieved?

LW: Yeah, I think they felt the same way I did. In fact probably more so because, well, I, you know my father served in the military, and I… but I don’t know that they were particularly leaning towards me serving also in the same way that my dad did. But, they’re very, very religious and were much more excited and grateful that I was able to serve a mission, rather than be involved in the conflict and be drafted.

SG: How soon after… or, how old were you when you went on your mission?

LW: I was nineteen. I turned nineteen in January and then left… well, actually I might have turned… it was a long time ago, see? These stories might be true; they might be just a little bit off.

SG: It’s okay.

LW: Not intentionally untrue, but just forgetting. I turned nineteen on my birthday in the mission home, but I can’t quite tell. But anyway, somewhere in the there… I was pretty close to… right at nineteen when I left.

SG: Okay. When you turn in your papers, is it the same process as it is today?

LW: Mm hmm.

SG: Were you at all afraid when you turned in your papers, that you might get sent somewhere other than the United States? Did that ever cross your mind?

LW: Umm, foreign missions were not as big then. It’s 30 some odd years ago.
SG: Okay.

LW: And so really foreign wasn’t really… wasn’t a big thing. And I went to Texas so…

SG: Well, that’s kind of foreign.

LW: Well, yeah it is. Great folks in Texas though. Great southern hospitality and it was a lot of fun. So my parents would have been really glad that I went there and not. So we pretty much had to do the same thing; fill out papers, be recommended by the bishop and my father happened to be the bishop at that time, and a stake president interview and that sort of thing. The things that were different there was that I received my endowments there in the Salt Lake Temple, after I went to the mission home, so I didn’t go through the temple before. Of course, there wasn’t a temple close to where I lived anyway. So I went to the mission home and received my endowments there; actually a whole group of us did; received our endowments in the mission home. My parents didn’t go through with me. Yeah, not like today, or at least in the local area or where there’s a temple where brethren can go to the temple before they go on a mission.

SG: What was your image of the Vietnamese and their leaders when this whole thing started? Did you think of them as like, bad guys, good guys? Or was it just kind of… didn’t really give it any kind of thought?

LW: Probably not too much thought. Except that I… if the government said that there was a need to be there, I was supportive of it. I’m not usually too critical of matters such as that, or, in other words, fairly loyal. I was fairly loyal to the President to the government, who felt a need to be there, so I was fairly supportive of that.

SG: And you mentioned that you were in Texas during the conflict. Did the conflict at all affect your mission?

LW: Not that I recall. I do know that just before I came home the Vietnam conflict ended and they instituted the voluntary draft. So making it possible for all men to volunteer if they wanted to, but there were no requirements for draft. So when I returned home, my draft number became obsolete or unused and so at that point I just went to college, and went from there.

SG: How did the war affect the cities that you were in? Did you see, maybe, a lot of support for the troops in one certain city? Or a different town that had, maybe, a bunch of very young men serving? Did you notice any kind of difference?

LW: I really didn’t; not aware of it really at all. I know that Texas is a pretty strong state in a lot of ways politically. But I was not aware of any ways that the war impacted the state or cities that I was in while I was there.

SG: You also mentioned that you were still in Texas on your mission when the war ended. Were you there when the soldiers came home? Did you see any of them?
LW: Did not see any of them come home. Didn’t see any of them go, didn’t see any of them leave or return either… far enough away from it all that… if they did come home, of course, you know, as missionaries, we wouldn’t have been there probably. And I don’t remember knowing any… if I can remember; I didn’t know anybody who served. Either who went or who came back.

SG: And is that just from your mission, or is that from your hometown?

LW: From either. Neither from my hometown or my mission. Was not aware.

SG: So then all the guys in your homeward were able to serve missions instead?

LW: Yeah, pretty much. I didn’t… one of my friends was involved in the guard a little bit, but he didn’t serve either. And so none of my friends did. None of my friends served in the military.

SG: Were you really relieved for that?

LW: Yeah, for the same reasons that I was concerned about going. So…

SG: So the war didn’t affect the community. Did the war affect… do you know what city or area you were in?

LW: No, I really don’t.

SG: Did the community have like a sudden sense of pride and joy when it found out that the war was over? That their sons would be coming home?

LW: No. The interesting thing that I think about that is that, is I think that it kind of ended by degrees, and so it wasn’t like a sudden… it wasn’t like the Gulf War, where we went in, took nine days and it was, you know, a major effort and we knew when it started, we knew definitely when it ended and deployment occurred, you know, people came home. It kind of slowly fizzled out. It ended and people started coming home a little… some here and some there. So, I don’t recall a general celebration or a, you know, parade kind of thing, or any sort of necessary major announcements. There may have been them, but I don’t remember them. And it’s either because I was on my mission and so focused elsewhere and may have seen it in passing, but not remarked it much because you know, we were thinking of other things. Or because it may have just, like I said, I think it really just kind of ended rather gradually. And so it was not a momentous “this event ended it.”

SG: I think it’s probably a good thing that they had it in… not that they planned it to be in degrees maybe, but that it wasn’t just all of a sudden, like wow. It gives people time to readjust. You didn’t have any other family members that served in the conflict?
LW: No, I was the oldest. Didn’t have any older brothers or sisters… any brothers that did. And no relatives that were my age served that I knew of.

SG: I remember in World War II they had, the big thing was having a victory garden and food rationing. Did that occur during this conflict?

LW: No, not to my knowledge, that didn’t happen at all. I think that the economy was much more tied to that in World I and World War II. By the time the 60s came around we were pretty isolated from that. But I’m sure that in certain areas where armaments were made or where, you know, ships or planes, or military installments would have noticed a big difference, but being in Wyoming, we were pretty far from that.

SG: What were your feelings on that? Were you glad that you were so far away? Or would you have wished to be maybe a little more closer to the…

LW: No, I was glad to be away. Like I said, I was very supportive of what the government was doing, so it wasn’t like I was unpatriotic or not or anything that didn’t feel a sense of missing out or anything because I wasn’t around those kinds of things that may have happened.

SG: When you were on your mission, did you like, were there like protests or anti-war movements or rallies going on that you can remember?

LW: I wasn’t involved in any nor did I see any there. I knew of them happening in other, from other colleges around the nation. I remember reading about them in the newspaper. And it might have been even before I went on my mission or during, but I do remember that, but I was never involved firsthand, nor saw that happening where I was.

SG: That’s good. Do you think that if they were… I know that you were on your mission, focused on other things, but do you think that if there was a movement or a rally going on around you, would that have altered any feelings or have distracted you? Or were you focused enough on the Work?

LW: Well, I think that… well, I’m sure that it would have made a difference in the Work because people would have not been as willing to talk about religion; rather more inclined to talk about the war. Because, you know, it would have been a major thing and important. And because of the divided sentiment towards the war in Vietnam, you know, there would have been some in favor and some against… and others kind of neither one way nor the other, but still a topic of conversation. So I’m sure that if it would have happened like that, it would have made a difference in what we were doing.

SG: Do you think that because of the conflict that was going on, that maybe people would be looking for… I don’t know, maybe some kind of spiritual answer to some questions that they had or was there…
LW: That happens a lot. I don’t remember that happening in my situation. I did serve on a military base my last six months. I served on Wichita Falls Military Base. But the war was over then and I, and again there was no involvement there with the war with that base. I don’t remember any connection with it at all. Our only concern was were soldiers coming or going to and from the war at all. The ward was; there were a lot of people in the ward that were based in the military there. It was actually one of my most successful areas. We baptized about, well, it was actually two separate families there on the base. So the war was over enough that things settled down that people were focusing now on other things. But I really did not, I didn’t have any experience with anyone who had lost a son or a daughter in the conflict, and then as a result, were questioning their faith of looking for answers, spiritual answers that might have helped them out. So I didn’t find any body in that respect.

SG: That’s good. Can you describe to me what a base is? Like, I’ve heard people talking about it, but I don’t really understand like, what a military base really is, or like an air force base really is. I’m just a city girl, so I’m not really sure what that means. Like in the movies where it’s like a fenced off area that people can’t go in and out of? Are there houses in there?

LW: Typically a base is made up of military buildings, barracks, for all the soldiers who are there, parade grounds areas for training, for preparation, for buildings, like school buildings so that they can meet and teach and train, large areas for marching and organizing and so forth. And each base usually has a focus. So a base might focus on air force or navy, or marines, or infantry. Therefore, then each base would be different according to that purpose. And it also includes housing; married housing and single housing for those that were involved in either… men and women; whichever their status was. Most of the military were men. The women were not nearly as involved as they are today. It was controlled access; you could only go in and out of one road. I do remember that because there was an LDS chapel on the base, we were able to go onto the base. We had a little sticker on our “hornet.” That was a car, called a hornet. And, I do remember that it was really, we were really puffed up in pride. It was cool because when we’d drive up, they’d see the little sticker there and they would salute us and wave us through. That was a big thing to a twenty year old. You know, a twenty-year-old kid.

SG: It’s like in the movies.

LW: Yeah, it was like in the movies. It was kind of like they salute and, you know, wave you through. It was kind of cool.

SG: So official.

LW: Yeah, it was official. It was pretty fun. But because we had an LDS chapel on the base, we could teach on the base, but you couldn’t proselyte on the base. But people could come to us. So we would go to the chapel and teach, and then people that were interested would come and we would teach them there in the office.
SG: Well, that’s kind of cool because they’re like, coming to you and like that probably shows a little more interest than you knocking on the door and getting the door slammed.

LW: It was a lot of fun. It made the mission I worked more enjoyable and different.

SG: That’s awesome. Like, when I was looking at the Vietnam conflict, because I don’t know that much about it; I know what I’ve seen in movies, like there’s a little segment in Forrest Gump, where it talks about the Vietnam War. Do you think that Hollywood movies do it justice? Or, do they play it out a little bit too much?

LW: Well, I think that probably now, I’m sure that then there was a lot of censorship and concern about the truth of the matter. I think that since then, people are recognizing that some of the truth was never told. And Hollywood always make things more glorious or maybe more dramatic than it might have been. But I suppose that any time you’re in a war that it’s always pretty terrible. And so, if it’s portrayed terribly, then that’s probably more the truth than not. But, you know how Hollywood always puts a slant on it and it’s always pretty traumatic.

SG: What do you think some of the causes were for going into Vietnam? Do you think it was maybe America thought that we should act as the police force? Do you think that we were going into just, like, attack everybody? Do you have any thoughts on that?

LW: Well, it’s interesting, in fact, I talked to my kids, my students at the high school here and we talked about Iraq and some other things, but pretty much the attitude is the United States has been, really ever since the United States has been in existence as a nation, that we recognize equality and democracy and the desire to have, for all nations in the world to be that way and usually see ourselves as a police force frame of mind, and that’s what happened in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese with guns and ammo and support from communist China, were invading Vietnam. And so the Untied States went in to stop that. That was exactly what Vietnam was all about; to stop communism from coming into Vietnam.

SG: Now, were you born and raised in the church?

LW: Yes.

SG: Did you think that, well, you mentioned that you support the President and the government; do you think that it was a good thing that we went into Vietnam? Or maybe not? Do you have any feelings on that?

LW: I was supportive of it then and I’m supportive of it now. I know that it costs lives, and I know that it wasn’t handled right in some respects. Our hands were tied. Different for today, like example Iraq. And I see a lot of similarities between the two. My perception of… now that I’m older, and maturer, I have really developed a great sense of gratitude for military, for people who have the courage to join the military and go to Iraq and give their life for me. And, of course 9-11, I think created that for me too. Or
increased that, I suppose. But, and it just breaks, and I just feel so bad that there are people that are dying out there in Iraq trying to bring democracy, and what we think as Americans to a better way of life and prevent people like Saddam Hussein and Hitler and the communists from ruining other people’s lives. I’m very supportive of that, but I’ve really developed a great gratitude for those who have the courage like I never did; to go and fight and give their life. I see a lot of similarities there, but I have a profound respect for them. One of the teachers at the high school has both of his children in the military. One of them actually ended up in Iraq on an aircraft carrier in a support position there. Another one was a marine, floating around the earth somewhere probably over by Alaska or wherever, so he wasn’t involved in the conflict. But nevertheless, there was some connection there and contact. You know when things are going on and he was glued to the internet and glued to the TV and glued to his telephone, wanting to know where his daughter was. So it gave me a different perspective of the matter.

SG: It’s kind of funny that you mention that you probably wouldn’t have had the courage to serve, and when I was in high school, I was really gung-ho about joining the marines. It was just something that I really wanted to do. And it’s kind of funny that my mom was actually the one who stepped in and said no. She’d had a bad feeling about this and you know, not a year later, we had 9-11. And, that was kind of interesting the way that the Lord kind of steps in and kind of see His hand in things. You mentioned that you see a lot of similarities between Vietnam and what’s happening today in Iraq. That’s kind of the same thought that I had. Do you think that the people that are protesting the war in Iraq today, is that the… are they going about it the same way that people who opposed Vietnam did? Do you think that they’re doing it for the right reasons in their mind?

LW: I think that there’s… in America, we have that freedom to have that group and so it’s there. And they behave that way and act that way. Attitudes, you know, it’s very, very interesting, you look at patriotism in that World War I and World War II and that, you know, America celebrated and cheered and sent the troops off, and there was by and large a great support of that. But because of the death toll there, I think that we kind of said whoa, wait a minute, maybe that’s a little bit much, maybe we ought to do it a little bit differently. So when it came time for other conflicts like, so when the Korean conflict came, and Vietnam came, people were a little bit less willing to support or to send people and, it’s very interesting too, because now we know, not because of the communication, we know within an hour, so to speak, when or where an American soldier has died in Iraq. Yeah, it’s broadcasted throughout the whole nation. And we have such a sense of loss for that, rightfully so, but because of that, it seems to magnify the seriousness of the situation. Whereas when they, men, were in Vietnam and some of the women, I mean, things were happening, but people weren’t knowing about it. And I’m not saying that’s good or bad. But there’s a difference there. And the same with all the other wars before that as well. Now, it’s such a high cost if one soldier dies and it is, but when you put it, when you do it that way, then it’s almost… it almost goes the other way… public thought almost goes the other way to say that it’s not worth it, and I become quite frightened because nobody is willing to sacrifice for the good of a group of people. And those opportunities for sacrifice are not there and I think that that makes our nation less strong. But of course I didn’t volunteer. So, but I’m not trying to speak out of both sides of my
mouth, because I have a really great respect for them. But there’s always been occasions when great nations have always had great people who have given their lives for their country, for their people, for their homes. You know we read about them in the scriptures. In the Book of Mormon and the Old and New Testament and it happened. People had the courage and were called upon to give their life for someone else. Not that that necessarily needs to be a requirement, but when it happens, people are ennobled by that.

SG: This is a side note, but did you by any chance catch the play that they did a couple years ago? I think it was fall of 2002, Hole in the Sky? It was about 9-11.

LW: Oh yeah. I knew that it was here, but I did not see it.

SG: It was cool.

LW: Did you see it?

SG: My former best friend was in it. She had a small role, but it was so amazing because did you hear what it was about?

LW: No, just saw the reviews about it and the brochures.

SG: Well basically it’s a fictional setting, but it’s based on first-hand accounts about what happened on a specific floor in the, I believe it was in the second tower that went down. And there were flashbacks to what happened the morning before people went to work. And after the play was over they had a collage of quotes by different people; some of them soldiers, some of them generals, presidents of the country. And it was kind of fun to, well, not fun, but amazing to hear them and their views on like, what happened. And they didn’t say who it was, but the last voice that we heard was President Hinckley, and how he talked about the people that lost their lives. Do you remember who the president of the Church was during the conflict?

LW: I’m trying to remember who signed my missionary papers. It was Joseph Smith, Hunter came after that, and before Joseph Smith was McKay. I think it was Joseph Fielding Smith who was the prophet at the time.

SG: Did he speak out or anything?

LW: You know, I don’t remember that. I really don’t remember that. I do remember President Hinckley talking about it and even speaking about it General Conference, and there may have been some things about it and even speaking about it in General Conference, and there may have been some things about it in the conference sessions during Vietnam but I don’t remember them specifically.

SG: But say compared to like now, or 9-11, did you think that the General Authorities are speaking out a little bit more now, as opposed to back then?
LW: I would say yes.

SG: Yes?

LW: I would say yes.

SG: And what do you think about that?

LW: I think it’s right, I think it’s good. I think that, again, you know, President Hinckley in a way said he supported the decisions of the United States to do the things that they’re doing there. And the supporting our focus on preserving our homeland and keeping democracy and keeping the freedom of religion and freedom of speech and so forth and would have been, like the people in the Book of Mormon who fought for their family and their loved ones and their homes, and had to do that in order to save them. And deplore those in local and the world who were trying to destroy those, or took advantage of those, you know, affect people.

SG: One of the things historians say is that what people learn about history is that nobody learns from history. And that was kind of fun, well, not fun, that’s the wrong word to use, but kind of interesting to compare certain events that happened in history. Like with when September 11th came about, there was a lot of comparison to the attack on Pearl Harbor, back in 1941, and like, with the whole patriotism upswing. Do you think, well, you mentioned that Korean, no not Korean, but the Vietnam conflict had a lot of similarities with what is going on today in Iraq. And that’s something that I also noticed; that America going into, mainly to help. What kind of feelings…

LW: I think the difference is that because of 9-11, and then Iraq following right on the heels of that, and then still our chase of Osama Bin-Laden, and our desire to find out terrorism and to prevent that world-wide, I think that more people were inclined to go to Iraq, then they were the Vietnam War. We had been damaged, we had been hurt. We were vulnerable. Thousands of our best had been killed and they had attacked American soil. And I think that we realized that I think more of the nation was in favor of continuing to preserve and fight those forces. So I think that’s the difference between Iraq and Vietnam. Because we had not been personally attacked, if you will; personally affected here in the United States, like we were here before we went into Iraq or to fight with Osama Bin-Laden and try to eliminate terrorism; to make an active war on terrorism. And that’s a difficult thing because it exists all over the whole world. And trying to fight that is very, very difficult. But I see that as one of the main differences.

SG: Nowadays, with President Bush, being the president, it’s always said that he starts every day with a prayer, and that he is a very spiritual and religious leader. Did you think that the presidents during the Vietnam conflict, like Kennedy, Johnson, and maybe a little bit of Nixon… do you think that they maybe were, I don’t want to say prepared because nobody’s really prepared, but maybe, yeah, I guess, more prepared… do you think that
they can compare with President Bush? Do you think that they had that religious kind of
mindset for the good of the country?

LW: My understanding was that Kennedy was very Catholic and was a very faithful
Catholic to my understanding. Nevertheless, Nixon got involved in Watergate and ended
up resigning, and looking back at Kennedy’s life, we realized that he was, you know, had
some problems with his personal life, and some choices that I would not, did not agree
with what he did. I don’t know. I can’t remember too much about Johnson, maybe that
was okay. I am personally grateful that George Bush is the president during this 9-11 and
Iraq business, rather than… and I just lost the name of who…

SG: Gore.

LW: Rather than Al Gore. I think that Al Gore would have managed it in a completely
different way…

SG: Because he invented everything.

LW: And I don’t believe that there would have been that spiritual connection or focus or
desire or approach on his way. I don’t think that he would have done that. He’s not that
kind of a man. So I’m really grateful that George Bush is there. Of course I guess I’m a
republican by party, but and have always been pretty conservative that way. But even if I
wasn’t, you know as far as that’s concerned, just looking straightly at character and
respect for the individual and respect for their attitudes for God, and towards His
influence in the world. You know, I’m very grateful that George Bush is there. And the
way he’s managing it that way.

SG: I think a lot of us are. Like, it’s a great comfort to me to know that he is very
religious and seeks the hand of Heavenly Father in all of his major decisions like they
say. And I think that’s really awesome and then it’s like, you look at Clinton and
Kennedy and all these other presidents who, as a president, did amazing things, but in
their personal life, that personally, as a Latter-day Saint, I would not agree with at all.
And I know that a lot of the people, Latter-day Saints or not, didn’t agree with it. Maybe
the things in a president’s personal life affect what they do in the political arena.
Personally for me, I don’t know very many political things, and character to me is a lot. If
something’s going to happen in their personal life, then sure, it’s their personal life, but
it’s also them, and they can have an impact on other aspects of their life. So do you think
that maybe what happened with Kennedy and his personal life, have an affect on maybe
where we went as far as Vietnam? Do you think that had any…

LW: Well, that’s a very good question. I agree with you. Kennedy was during a time
when the United States was really in a time of prosperity. He was a very well beloved
president. There were very few people that hated him. Unfortunately there were one or
two or three or whatever number it was to bring about the assassination, but it was a great
time when he was president. The United States was on a high. Things were great, money
was good, the economy was good, people were good, jobs were good. Things were
working very, very well. I think he made wise decisions. I think he did a lot of things right. And I think that there a lot of people that do a lot of things right, whether their character is right or not, they make wise decisions in terms of, you know, political things, and I think that helps. I mean, I think that is still possible. I still believe, like you, that the better is the one like George Bush or somebody who is religious and whose character matches his office, his presidency, and his choices. And, that’s always, that’s the best combination. And so I think that he really is apart from many others.

SG: I don’t know personally, too much about Johnson. I know that a lot of people thought him strange in certain aspects. I can’t remember, was Nixon president, like did his term start, do you remember, while the war was going on?

LW: Nope, I can’t remember. I do know, I do remember that, I remember hearing the speech where he resigned as a result of Watergate, and that happened after I was married and was in college. So I do not know the dates.

SG: What college did you go to? Did you start college after you were married?

LW: I came to BYU… sorry, let’s start again. I came to Ricks College the first fall after I graduated and then I went on my mission in January, right after that fall. So I had a semester at Ricks College.

SG: So what were the years again?

LW: That would have been in 1970. Fall of 70 was my first college year at Ricks. Then I came home in 73, went to BYU after that… the fall of 73. I came home in January, no February of 73, and went to BYU fall of 73.

SG: What is your wife’s name?

LW: Cynthia. And George is her maiden name.

SG: Did you guys get married when you were in college?

LW: Yeah, I came home in January. We’d had a blind date when we were seniors in high school. I was from Wyoming, she was from Rigby. Her second cousin’s my best friend. He was a year older than I was so he was over at Ricks, so he invited me and my other friend to come over. So he arranged a blind date. Both of us were dating somebody else and didn’t pay any attention. But I came home and then she happened… my folks had moved into her ward, from Wyoming to Rigby. So when I came home, I reported in Rigby. She lived in that ward. She was up to college. We made connections again and started dating and… well, actually, I asked her out on her birthday, which is March.

SG: That’s a nice birthday present.
LW: Yeah, because her mother was quite a matchmaker. And she arranged… so I asked her out… I actually asked her out on that day. We started dating then, on her birthday in March. And got engaged in August, and then were engaged in the fall semester in BYU. We got married in December of 1973.

SG: Which temple did you guys get married in?

LW: We got married in the Idaho Falls temple… during Christmas break. So essentially, counting… so that would have meant that I would have had a year’s worth of school as a single, but all of the rest of my schooling was done while I was married.

SG: Just maybe basing a BYU attitude on an attitude up here, was after the war, were there still feelings of hostility towards, say, maybe the government? Towards the president, over this conflict? Or was it not as…

LW: It wasn’t as volatile or nearly as big an issue. And then, for me too, I just went about my work and really didn’t pay any attention to it. Wasn’t worried about it, somewhat isolated… choosing to be isolated, if you will. And just went about my own business. I felt safe to do that and comfortable to do that and so, and so I did. You know, once the war was over, there’s not much people can do to protest. I mean, it’s over, so what can you do? Things that would have been said and done, as reports would have filtered back and the people would have been upset at what happened and brought that to people’s attention, and that’s very, very important. But even at that, you know, it finished and it ended, you know, there’s no steam there. And, you know you say whether or not you’ve learned something because now we’re done and doing the same things again, but I was supportive of it, my son was not. He questioned George Bush and his decisions to go to Iraq. I said I supported it. I feel bad that it’s lasted as long as it has, and the way that it has, and that the soldiers are still being killed and that there’s still a lot of tension there. So I’m really, really concerned about that, but still supportive of it.

SG: Now when you were in college after the war was over, or conflict… politically correct, did you feel a sense of patriotism parallel to that after 9-11?

LW: Nope, not in the same way at all. See, it’s kind of like Pearl Harbor with a lot of similarities there. When Pearl Harbor hit, when we were there, then our ways to be patriotic then was to join the wars and that’s what we did, and we took care of it. We ended the war and finished it. So our response to 9-11 was very much the same way. But the end of Vietnam was not that way.

SG: Now, when I was in high school, we had to do a senior paper. It had to be ten pages long. I wanted to go into history, so I did my paper on the causes and effects of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. And it actually could have been prevented. The government knew that the Japanese were going to bomb. They just didn’t know the exact location. They knew it had to be somewhere in the Pacific, they knew it was somewhere they had a base. Do you think that the conflict in Vietnam could have been prevented? That the
government could have maybe talked their way out of getting involved or do you think that it was just a one shot thing?

LW: The cold war was going on before that. There was a lot of upset, I mean, we had a lot of antagonism. There was a lot of political tension. That was very real. You know, it’s very easy to look back on Pearl Harbor or an event such as that or 9-11 and say the government knew this, this, and that, and therefore they should have done this and that. I don’t believe that that is in any way to exonerate or to vilify or to say that the government was very, very wrong. Because you have to realize that intelligence like that is very difficult to gather and to determine and to make decisions based on that, and confirming whether the sources are correct on that or not. People can only act on what they know and it’s not fair to come back and say shame on you for doing this when it wasn’t true.

SG: Thank you for your time.