Editor Notes: The interview took place at Thompson International, which is where Jerry Combest is employed. My tape recorder broke with in the first ten minutes, ruining the tape that held the first ten minutes of the interview. The interview overall went efficiently, aside from a few off-topic stories.

A: I didn't have any preparation I just crossed that bridge when I came to it...

Q: Mm...

A: And uh, I think about things that has been helpful to me. I was used to being given things to do and having to do them without question...

Q: Mm...

A: ...and then I was much older than everybody else. People that when in there with me were 18 or 19 years old and I had just gotten out of college, I was older and most always the drill sergeants supposedly thought I was more mature. I don't think that they knew that to the degree, but they knew that just because I had a degree, I was older and, in the circumstances, and rough situations it wasn't that bad for me, so the preparation for me was virtually 0 for me going in.

Q: So, you joined with your friend?A: No, he was friend was already in it; I just joined cold turkey...

Q: He was in it?

A: I just joined cold turkey. I didn't know anybody when I went in.

Q: Any other family members?**A:** Pardon?

Q: Any other family members?

A: No, my father was in the military, WWII but that was lt.

Q: But that was it?

A: That was it. Most of my friends got married and a lot of them that I went to high school with didn't go to college and they got married.

Q: Why is it that if you get married that you don't have to join?

A: Because it was more of financial obligation and everything else. You didn't not join, you didn't get drafted if you were married; you had to take care of the responsibilities, take care of the wife and if she got pregnant, the baby and everything, so they just went for all the single people first.

Q: Right. And that is different than the other wars because if you got drafted, you were done.A: Yeah, but, but they have priorities at first. We reached the point of WWII where it didn't matter cause everyone had to go. If they were a certain age, but I think that it has always been kind of

prioritized. Then towards the end of the Vietnam War, they went to having these numbers, lottery numbers or some kind of deal where they had us.

Q: Really ...?

A: So, I really wasn't too interested.

Q: Yeah. So, what were your first days of service like for you?

A: Well, my friend always told me, "pick you a friend out, get someone that is clean, looks good and everything because after the first day everyone looks just alike."

Q: Ha-ha.

A: They shave your head, give you all clothes just alike, so everybody is clean cut, neat and everything. So, I picked out a friend the first day, and we stayed friends pretty much all through the whole military.

Q: Really?

A: After the first day you couldn't tell... you can't always judge someone by their appearance, but in a lot of instances you can.

Q: Right...

A: But after the first day, you couldn't tell so, I didn't have any problems really with any of it

Q: Was he older?

A: Younger.

Q: Younger.

A: He was 18, he had just gotten out of—and all of them was 18 or 19—he had just gotten out of high school...he was going to get drafted, too. So, he joined the air force, he ended up making a career out of it.

Q: Oh wow.

A: Yeah so, I got out as quick as I could.

Q: (laugh)

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A: Had other games to play, other places to go.

Q: (laugh) So... being in boot camp, can you tell me a little bit about that?

A: Well it, it's pretty difficult. It is a lot different than it is today. They abused you mentally to see how you would react but that time you didn't understand it; they don't do that as much now because they can't call your mother names and everything like they did back then.

Q: They would do that?

A: Oh yeah. But, but in retrospect in looking back what they were trying to put all kinds of pressure on you. The whole purpose of boot camp and training and everything is to put you under extreme pressures...

Q: Mmhmm...

A: ...and then see if you can still function.

Q: Mmhmm...

A: That's the whole purpose of all of it; they call you everything in the world, do everything to you, but you still got something to do. But can you take that pressure and do that. That's the whole purpose of that pressure in the military. Because if you are in the middle of battle and you got pressure of the battle and you can't perform your function to protect yourself, or your

Conrad's, whatever, then you don't need to be there. See, you need to be able...so that's kind of the purpose of why they are always making you do things like shining your shoes until you can see yourself in them and everything

Q: Mmhmm...

A: ...and everything had to be perfect.

Q: My friend, Zach, he joined the air force a few years ago. But he said, you know, making your bed then, I mean everything had to be perfectly like...

A: ... yeah and that is that same...

Q: ...I mean like creases and everything.

A: But the purpose in that was so that they put all kind of pressure on you; you still had to do whatever your job was.

Q: So, you definitely think that it was worth it?

A: Well, at that time, you thought it was stupid but in retrospect, once you realize what they were trying to do... they didn't tell you what they were trying to do.

Q: Mmhmm...

A: But in retrospect looking back on it, I think that it probably was good. A lot of people couldn't handle it, that pressure, been cursed; everything had to be perfect, so they just let them out almost... gave them a discharge.

Q: wow...

A: And they were happy to get out because they couldn't, because it was just... but nowadays most kids couldn't do it nowadays.

Q: They won't let you?

A: (inaudible) Well they couldn't handle it anyways, because their mom and dad and everybody would be coming down there being like, "you can't talk to my son that way!"

Q: (laugh) Yeah.

A: So, it's a...I understood it...I didn't know it at that time. I always did what I was supposed to back then, didn't question things. You know, if they told you to do something and you just did it. I keep going back to that, but it's not that way anymore, you know, whether It's good or bad, I'm not saying... everything has its own merit.

Q: Right.

A: That's just the way it was, my parents told me to do something if I said "why"...I could...

Q: You were in trouble.

A: Bad trouble; I couldn't do anything for a month.

Q: Mmhmm...

A: I didn't say "why," I either did it or acted like I did it.

Q: (laugh)

A: That's ok; times change, you know, you have to change ya know...

Q: Your instructors, what were they like?

A: Most of them were guys that...they were good to me. All of them were always good to me, because I was older, and I had a big advantage ...

Q: Mmhmm...

A: ... over all the other people to be honest. It was that way all the way through boot camp and technical training and even when I arrived at my first base. They started me right out teaching things to help people get their classifications, to get promoted.

Q: Really?

A: I started out doing that at the beginning, so it was always, under a little different circumstances the whole time.

Q: So, the others in your um, all the people you were around... did they have a respect for you then? Probably, they didn't really give you a hard time.

A: They probably did have respect for me, but they didn't know me (laugh) because if they knew me, they probably didn't because I was about like everyone else really. The thing about going to college and some things that relate to the military. I had an employer work for some big company, and they hired like 50,000 people; I was talking to him about this job one time and it required you to be a college graduate. And I said, I don't know why you have to be a college graduate to do this I know a lot of

people than can do this that are a lot smarter than I... by far, and they're not a college graduate and I said "they can do this blindfolded" and he said, "well, you know what the purpose is? We can eliminate so many factors and we know that they're capable of learning."

Q: Mmhmm...

A: We don't know that they are going to be capable of learning. There are several factors like that even though they didn't know if I was smart, dumb, anything between, but they knew I graduated from college, so that just has always been an advantage for me in the military, being enlisted especially.

Q: right.

A: Being around people of lesser great .

Q: And you know that is kind of how it is still today; you know, it's not about how smart you are all the time... because there could be someone that didn't even graduate high school that is very, very intelligent...

A: Oh yeah.

Q: ... but if you have that degree it shows that you know...or that you are willing to learn. Alright, so we know that you served in Vietnam. Where exactly did you go?

A: I was far down in Da' Nang Air Force Base; we didn't fight hand to hand. We just got shot at in the air force. You were on the base and they would mortar the base or trying to get on the base. So, we were in Da' Nang and I was in reconnaissance, which is legalized spying, is what that amounts to; these airplanes we had were very, very expensive...

Q: Uh huh.

A: ...And they were so expensive they said "If you guys every wanna talk—4 or 5 of you 6 or 8 of you get away from the airplane, because if they ever sent a mortar in, they were going to try to destroy the airplane. They aren't gonna try and kill the guys, because if they destroyed that 100-million-dollar airplane it'd be on all the papers in the United States, that a 100-million-dollar airplane was destroyed. If they killed 6 guys, everybody's attitude would be like, "6 guys got killed...we can just send 6 more in no big deal."

Q: But the airplane was more valuable than human life?

A: Oh yeah, Oh yeah. For sure.

Q: Wow

A: You see, men were always designed to go to war and then to die.

Q: Mmhmm.

A: That's the way it's been, but not anymore. I'm talking about...

Q: Right.

A: ... At that time. So, it got pretty rough in Da' Nang and we left Da' Nang and went to Cam Ranh Bay. [Cam Ranh Bay, Ninh Thuan, Vietnam] and that was pretty nice.

Q: You liked it there the best?

A: Yeah, well, it was safer, and I liked it there, but it was a very beautiful area.

Q: Yeah.

A: The ocean was beautiful, everything there was beautiful. We thought finally after the war probably it'd be like South Korea. You know, that big resort area; course you know, everyone just walked away from the war. But yeah it was okay; that was the two main place and I would spend 45 days in Vietnam and 45 days back to Japan.

Q: Were you ever in Okinawa?A: YepQ: Did you go there?

A: Yep

Q: My grandpa went there.

A: I went to Okinawa for the Pueblo Crisis...

Q: Uh huh...

A: ... and that's when the Koreans captured the ship The Pueblo. We all went to Oshawa Air Force Base in Okinawa. We went up there for 45 days, so I was up there for that crisis. It was cold.

Q: Yeah. My grandpa was stationed there. Arriving at those places, what did you like best about where you were?

A: Uh, nothing.

Q: Nothing?A: No, not really.

Q: You were in war so how could you enjoy anything.

A: There really wasn't anything to enjoy. You just made the best of where you were, you know, and drank beer and smoked cigarettes during the off time and not abuse anybody, not abuse your job or anything like that.

Q: What exactly was your job or assignment?

A: I was flying crew chief on the C-130 which was the Reconnaissance C-130. People that flew on airplanes would fly a Russian mission or Vietnamese mission and all the people, would speak that

language, and we'd fly over international waters and they would monitor and try to pick up signals of what was going on...

Q: Yeah.

A: ...as to what they were saying and stuff.

Q: So, where you in combat a lot?

A: No.

Q: No?

A: No. Just we'd get shot coming in or out sometime or they would shoot at us on the base but usually not with rifles, usually with big mortars. They'd be outside and shoot a mortar in but that's what they do. Well, it was every day but not a lot. You didn't think about getting killed as much, to be honest. Because they had to hit just right and the marines surrounded the base and the army to protect us, so we were in pretty good shape.

Q: Well, that's good. Did you know others treated differently because of gender, race, ethnicity or any other...?

A: No, because when I first got there, I played basketball in college, and I got there they immediately wanted me to play basketball on a team. And in college, I played against one black person...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ... and in all my years in college I only played against one black person. When I got over there, I was on the basketball team; I was the only white person.

Q: Really?

A: There were eleven blacks and me, and that's because I didn't get to play against the best athletes in college and, as you can see now, I don't know if I could play college ball today because of the athletically ability of whites and blacks. So, no I think as a matter of fact in my opinion I saw more racial equality than I saw in the air force when I was overseas than I had...

Q: Than you ever had in your whole life.

A: Yeah, that I ever in my life at that time. Of course, I was raised to be not prejudiced by my parents for living in the south. My dad, when they boycotted the schools, I was part of that program, my father made me go to school. The first day they boycotted the schools here, there were three black people in the schools. Everyone else, no one went to school out of the 8th grade because there was a black kid in the school. So, that was back in what I call the "stupid days," and my father didn't believe in it so as far as the gender thing, women weren't really involved that much in the military at that time. I don't know, I don't think that was a prejudice thing; I just don't think women looked to do that. In fact, I think most women, probably at that time, looked down more on women that went in the military.

Q: That's not something the women did then, huh?

A: No, no. So as far as the air force, I think the racial equality was really good at that time.

Q: So, what would be your most memorable experience?

A: (inaudible) that was the head of all of the Vietnamese military, he was the most famous person of all. I was just thinking one day, we had these rifles here by us, and everything and he landed right there by our (inaudible) and got off the plane and walked right by me and everybody else, and I could have picked up the rifle and killed him. And I don't mean that I would have; it never entered my mind but there was a phenomenal protest here in the United States at that time, and I was thinking about the security. Not just me, anybody could have just killed him or anything there because we were all just a bunch of American guys over there in the war. So, I always remember that, but I didn't wanna kill him; I don't think anybody did. But I just thought, I can't believe this guy got off the plane and just walked by here all of us and there was no security or anything.

Q: And nobody did it...?

A: Especially what was going on here in the United States, because they were rioting over here and everything, protesting about the war. The other thing was one day I was standing on the flag line, and I remember this jet coming over and doing flips on top of me. This guy had just shot down himself, four or five Russian airplanes over the Delta and he came back in celebrating his thing, and we didn't know it, but we found out the next day that that's why he was turning all those flips and everything over the airbase.

Q: (laugh)

A: I remember his name Olds I think...Cornell Olds, and he left there and became the head of the Air Force Academy right after that. So, that was kind of neat to be in there during that time, that's the most airplanes anybody shot down in the war.

Q: How did people move up in their rank?

A: You just had to basically keep your nose clean, that was bout the bottom line, do your job.

Q: Don't get in trouble?

A: Yeah, just don't get in trouble, arrested for getting drunk or just doing stupid things, not showing up for work on time. If you just do What you're supposed to, you normally moved up.

Q: You'll move up?

A: Yeah, but you have time and grade in the air force, so if you save the President's life, you couldn't get promoted unless you had a certain amount of time in that particular rank. You may have to wait 10 months—before you got promoted to your next rank, so you had to wait 10 months, it didn't matter what you did. That's called time and rank; so basically, you kept your nose clean, did what you were supposed to, and everything you could move right on up.

Q: Wow...so you talked a little bit about getting shot at some, but it wasn't all the time. Was there ever an instance when you were scared for your life?A: Not really.

Q: Not really?

A: No because most people, like I said I was on the base, it's kind of like--you ever been to Chicago?

Q: Mmhmm.

A: Well, you know, they kill a lot of people up there every day, but I don't know if you really worry about it.

Q: Right.

A: You know, it's kind of a similar situation in the air force. I could see guys out in the army shooting at each other every day, might be in that situation, but in the air force I just didn't think about it that much to be honest.

Q: Okay, were you ever around when an atomic bomb was dropped.

A: That'd be WWII

Q: WWII, wrong war. So, you can't remember anything about that then (laugh).

A: I was about 2 or 3...2 years old.

Q: Did your dad ever tell you any stories about it?

A: Well, no he wasn't there. That was in Nagasaki, about August or September, I think, of 45.

Q: He was in a different spot when that happened? Because you said that he was in WWII.

A: Yeah, but he never did go out of the states; he was here.

Q: Okay.

A: But anybody that was in here, whether they were a man or woman anything in Vietnam, their job was just as important as the guy that was fighting hand to hand, or my job over at the air force base. If they were cooking eggs down here at one of the bases down here in the United States, their job was just as important as mine because It takes the whole thing to make it work, you know?

Q: Everyone has to pull together huh?

A: Yep, it doesn't matter where ya are.

Q: How did you stay in touch with your family?

A: Didn't do a real good job of it, but just by mail. I would write a short letter, get a short letter back every once in a while. As most people do, they always wish they did more. But you know, it's easy to put off tomorrow what you could do today, it's real easy.

Q: Right.

A: I'm a real good procrastinator...It's one of my better attributes (laugh).

Q: (laugh) Me, too. Was it hard...did you know of anyone who didn't get any letters? Was it hard for them?

A: Not really.

Q: Not really?

A: I was pretty conceited, like most young people. I don't mean it that way; most people they live in their own little world...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...even today. You know, you can just live in your own little world and, you know in retrospect being older and everything, now you know wish done a lot more. When I was in high school, I wish I danced with the girls that wasn't good looking. You know what I mean, at a dance, things like that.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

A: That I wouldn't have done then. But now I think, "Golly, I wish I would have been nice to do things like that or something."

Q: Mmhmm

A: Back then people were just in their own little world.

Q: I can see you being the class clown type.

A: My son was; I wasn't.

Q: (laugh) You weren't?

A: No, I just you know, a lot of things you would have done. If somebody in your classes, their parent had died or something and you didn't go to the funeral home. You know, but in retrospect you look back...

Q: ...and wish you would have...

A: If Bill's dad, you know, all I had to do was take five minutes. Not to see him because he's dead, but little things like that. ...Yep. I was in the chow hall. I started out when I went to college, we had three meals for being an athlete. I was at the chow hall. Sunday morning, I couldn't wait to get up on Sunday morning, and go eat at chow hall when I was in the service. If you weren't working and everyone was sleeping in; I was the first in line for breakfast. So, I loved the food in the military.

Q: What kind? Just same as...

A: Yeah, it wasn't bad. The air force was particularly good, they say, I didn't know it. They said it was good; I always enjoyed it. They had pretty much stuff we was raised on. potatoes and beans, a lot of just simple things like that.

Q: Well, good. You know cause sometimes that's one of the hardest things about being away from home.

A: Yep, it was good.

Q: Well, good. Since you were in a different country how was it communicating?

A: There wasn't any problem because again, you were on your own circle.

Q: You were just on your base?

A: If you went out, you were, you know, it was their place. The Americans were really conceited; Americans think everything revolves around us. One time I was in France before they went to the Euro, and I was talking to some people about how many francs were in the dollar, and hell they were telling me, that's before they changed to the Euro, and I'm thinking if I was in Kansas how many francs are in a dollar. They'd say, "what's a franc?" (laugh)

Q: (laugh)

A: So, Americans, you know, they were in the own little deal. They think everyone revolves around them, but it doesn't. The more you travel, the more you realize. The people in China are about ten more than us, and I go over there a lot...

Q: Mmhmm.

A: ...and they could care less about what is going on over here.

Q: Where do you go?A: I go to China a lot.

Q: Oh, do you? **A:** Yeah.

Q: You have business over there?

A: No, I just go over there for Thompson.

Q: Oh, so you didn't really have to communicate that often with the civilians?A: No, and if I did it was in a bar.

Q: (laugh) And how did that go?

A: (inaudible) (laugh) You know, if they were in a bar, they could speak English.

Q: (laugh) Uniforms, what were they like, the clothing that you wore?A: Okay.

Q: Same ole air force?

A: Yep, yep. You had work uniforms and dress uniforms and stuff. Everything was fine.

Q: You didn't get to bring any of your clothes from home.

A: Oh, no, no. Of course, you would always buy some extra clothes for on the weekend or something like that. Places we were, but if you weren't in Vietnam or something you could just put on regular clothes.

Q: So, you could go out. Is that how people entertain themselves...what would they do? **A:** Go to the bars.

Q: Go to the bars (laugh).

A: That's what most military guys do on the weekends. Go out that night, go downtown, listen to music, it's about like what you all are doing now...going to some night club. When I say bars, I mean about the same thing, and around the military bases a lot was set up to do that. And of course, I played sports in the military when it didn't interfere with going to Vietnam.

Q: Football?

A: No, I played baseball and basketball.

Q: So, did you do that most of time?

A: No, no I mean, I did what was in conjunction with my job. I'd get out of my job a lot of times and go play basketball because according to Sergeant (inaudible), so sometimes I'd go to Vietnam and come back and work out to where I had ball games and stuff, so I can play. They were good about that.

Q: Well, that's good.

A: You still got your time in, so it really didn't matter.

Q: Right, did you really have to do anything to take your mind off of the war?A: No not really, just dealt with the situation, but it wasn't that bad. You just didn't think that much about it, that's what was going on at the time.

Q: Did you ever have a time when you were on leave for a while?A: Yep

Q: What did you do during that time?

A: Just came home visited family and friends.

Q: How long usually was that time period?

- A: You get 30 days a year in the military.
- **Q:** So, you could take those whenever?
- A: Well yeah, pretty much in the military.

Q: So, you have to do like 30 days...I don't know what you are talking about obviously.

A: I was overseas for two years, so I took 30 days before I left. I used up part of them before I left, because I took them in advance. When I got back, I took a week or two out in California. In fact, when I got out of the military, I was in California when Bobby Kennedy got killed.

Q: Really!

A: Assassinated. Yeah, I was out there visiting some friends, out there and I came back to my hometown here in Henderson. I was going to spend a couple of weeks here, and after I found out I didn't want to stay here for weeks, I wanted to go to Florida for a week.

Q: Yeah.

A: You know, that best friend yours in high school that you were never going to part with, probably don't know where they are right now... it happens that way.

Q: (laugh) Yes it does. It does happen that way. Can you describe some of the relationships you developed, I know you said you had that friend that you found the first day.

A: That was pretty much it for me, because I didn't know anybody when I went in. That other guy we stayed in contact for a while, but we basically drifted apart. But I didn't have a lasting relationship with anyone in the military because you know, we are moving around a lot, going to different places and stuff like that. You don't spend much time with anyone. I spent more time with that guy than anybody else. But, you, you don't make too many friends—some people do, but I didn't.

Q: But you didn't.

A: It wasn't that I was unfriendly; 'I just wasn't in the environment or situation to do it.

Q: Right. Okay, the day that your service ended. Can you describe that day?

A: Well, I got out early; I didn't know I was going to. They called me in and said that they, Congress, had made a decision to let a million guys out of the military and guys that were in the military of the months October, November and December of 1965. You had to have gone in during those months.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: I went in November, so they told me.

Q: So, you were like "I'm taken it."A: Yeah, I said, I'm out.

Q: Yeah

A: They offered me at that time what was a lot of money in 1968, \$10,000 dollars. They'd fly me to Vietnam and let me re-enlist in Vietnam for four years, they'd give me \$10,000 dollars and if I did it in Vietnam, it was tax free and I told them

Q: ... you'd rather come home.

A: I'd rather come home and teach school for \$5,000 a year.

Q: (laugh).

A: So, I came back to Henderson and started teaching school for \$5,000 a year. So, the day I got out was just a hectic day. There wasn't anything to think about, had a bunch of things you had to get done, get cleared, your medical records, different things. Supposedly, they let you out you are cleaned up pretty good when ya get out.

Q: So, when you came home, how long had it been since you had been home.A: Not long, because I had been on leave a little bit before that and didn't know I was getting out... about three or four months.

Q: Well that's good. So, it wasn't like a big...

A: No because I was back state side anyway.

Q: Oh okay, so, on the days and the weeks afterwards, did you try to get back your life back together?A: Not really. The only thing that was really different is I'd catch myself not smoking and not wanting to throw a cigarette butt down or something like that because you couldn't do things like that in the military.

Q: Oh...

A: Of course, that was normal for me because smoke a cigarette snap it out. People didn't think about littering and things like that. Just little things like that.

Q: Uh huh.

A: Just looking over your shoulder, seeing if somebody was watching ya or something, but other than that, it didn't take long to get back into your normal bad habits.

Q: (laugh) Or good, I guess it depends on how you want to look at it. So, then you went and started teaching probably, here in Henderson.

A: Yeah, I was over here about 7 years, then I came to work for Thompson.

Q: You have been here for a little bit, huh?

A: Yeah. I left time in between here, but I have worked here a total of about 20 years.

Q: Did you stay in contact with anyone?

A: No.

Q: After the war... Your friend that you met?

A: No, a couple times... we have talked in the last ten years.

Q: Yeah... two or three more questions.

A: Okay, because I gotta go in about 2 minutes.

Q: Alright, did your experience in the military, air force, influence your thinking about the war, in general?

A: Well, the war was ridiculous anyway, especially when you go over there and 50,000 people die and a 100,000 wounded and then we just walk away from it for nothing. So, all that was for nothing...the Vietnam War was for nothing. Anyone that died there, anyone that wounded or mangled there, that was all just because that is what you were supposed to do for your country because all they really did was fight there about 15 years and then just packed up and walk away with nothing. So, it's ridiculous.

Q: You still feel it's ridiculous?

A: Yeah, I mean it was, there was nothing done. People did that and then there was nothing to show for it, zero. We just handed it back to the Vietnamese, say "here you go."

Q: All those people that died...A: Ran off, you know.

Q: So, what is the difference that you see in terms of how you think people thought of the war then compared to now?

A: Nobody thought anything, the war, the veterans those people thought of less than anyone in any other war because everyone was against it and a lot of the soldiers were against it, and they were against the soldiers.

Q: A lot of people are against the war now...but we at least support the soldiers.A: Yep.

Q: So, that could probably be one of the big differences?

A: Yep. Well, because they didn't care about the soldiers at all. I think Korea, WWII they had something to show for that war.

Q: Yeah.

A: After it was over with, and there is nothing to show for Vietnam, except-negatives.

Q: Well, is there anything else that you want to talk about?

A: No, not really. Old soldiers never die they just stayed away.

Q: (laugh) It's true.

A: I think that's what (inaudible).

Q: Yep. It's a good thing. Alright, well, thank you very much.

A: Yeah, and if you have anything else you want to talk about, you can call me on the phone, just feel free to.

Q: Okay I will.