

Interview with Greg Wagoner

Interviewer: Jack Jeffries

December 9, 2009

Q: My name is Jack Jeffries, and I am a student at USI, a history major, and I am interviewing Mr. Greg Wagoner of the United States Marine Corp, Retired, for the Veteran's History Project. It's an effort by the Library of Congress to collect and record audio and visual biographical data about the United States veterans. As a part of that, in association with Dr. Leigh Anne Howard, I'm here interviewing Mr. Greg Wagoner, and Mr. Wagoner, I'd like to first say thank you for doing this with me, I appreciate it very much.

A: Sure, no problem.

Q: And we're going to start off with just some very basic information. Mr. Wagoner lives here in Evansville and was in the USMC from June 1969 to November of 1995.

A: That's not correct.

Q: That's not correct?

A: I was in the MC from June 1969 to 1977, then I was in the United States Army from 1982 to 1995. I retired in the Army.

Q: OK, and you have down here that you served in Vietnam, and that during your stint in the armed forces you traveled to such places such as Vietnam, Europe, Korea and Germany.

A: Correct.

Q: Ok... Did you enlist?

A: I did.

Q: You did? When was that?

A: I enlisted in February of 1969.

Q: Were you in a relationship at that time? What was your life like at that time?

A: I was going to high school and was really just waiting for graduation to take place in June. As soon as I graduated, I think it was, about a week later, I left for boot camp.

Q: Speaking of boot camp, what was that like for you?

A: Not... it was everything I hoped it would be. I know a lot of people have a difficult time with boot camp, but I was totally mentally and physically prepared to go through boot camp so as far as that training went, it was good.

Q: You said you prepared, you felt prepared for it. How would you prepare for something like that both mentally and physically?

A: Well, mentally, my brother was in the Marine Corp, my dad was in the Army, so our family has a history of it; it doesn't require that much. Knowing that you need to forget everything and just learn what they teach you. Physically, you start working out and running, and just prepare yourself physically for boot camp.

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Q: You said you started off in the Marine Corp and from what you just told me you have a very good family history with it. Was there any reason you picked the Marine Corp over anything else?

A: No, I wanted to go into the Marine Corp, and it's kinda funny because after 8 years in the Marine Corp, I did leave, got my Bachelor's degree, and I went back to the MC to go into to their commissioning program, but I was 31 and at 31 they wouldn't waiver their cutoff date which was 30. So, I went to the Army, and the Army waived it and so I got commissioned in the Army.

Q: What were your instructors like during your first days in military service?

A: Professionals... they knew their job.

Q: How long were you in boot camp?

A: 8 weeks.

Q: 8 weeks? Are there any particular experiences from boot camp that stick out, that remain with you?

A: Shooting, although I was always a reasonably good shot, but to learn the discipline required for marksmanship- that has stayed with me a lot. More interesting is when I was in boot camp, we pretty much didn't have any contact with the outside world. I did not know a person had walked on the moon. In fact, I didn't even find that out until I came back from Vietnam. So, it was like what the rest of the world was doing while I was in boot camp. I just didn't have time to follow that.

Q: So, in other words, it's kind of a like an isolating experience?

A: Yep, pretty much.

Q: When you left boot camp did you feel prepared for what you were going into in Vietnam?

A: What you have to understand [is] that boot camp is only the beginning of your training. Nobody is sent straight from boot camp to any war area [or] any area of conflict. From boot camp they go to their MOS, which is their method of service. The MOS training, then, for me, I was trained to be a truck driver. Once I completed that, I went to- no actually I went to advanced infantry training, where we learned infantry tactics- and then I went to truck driving school, and at that point I had orders to Vietnam. Those orders were delayed, and I didn't go to Vietnam until six months later, but there was plenty of training other than boot camp. Boot camp is just the beginning. It's to tell you your right from your left, and to get your military bearings about you.

Q: So how long, how much other training did you have? I know you said you trained to be a truck driver; how long did that take?

A: Everything between boot camp and ultimately being a marine that would be capable of going to combat, probably six months.

Q: So, six months of training?

A: Sure.

Q: OK, moving on to the war experiences, tell us what wars you served in?

A: I served in Vietnam I went to Vietnam in June 1970. That's where it got kind of interesting, because I was sent there as an infantryman and a truck driver. And as soon as I got there, I was cross trained in NBC warfare, which is nuclear biological and chemical warfare, and after I got trained on that, I was trained to be a door gunner on helicopters. So, I mean being a door gunner on a helicopter, I had six or 7 MOS's by the time I finished.

Q: When you arrived in Vietnam, what was your mindset? What were you feeling?

A: That's pretty interesting because I was stationed in 29 Palms, California, which was out in the desert. They put together the First Provisional Rifle Company, which was a unit that was going to be sent to Vietnam, not as a replacement, but as an entire unit to do a tour in Vietnam and come home all together. Now, we took the jungle training in the middle of the desert, which I never figured out what the good of that was, and we all boarded planes together. We flew to Vietnam, and as soon as we stepped off the plane, we went to replacement companies and the Provisional Rifle Company was disbanded. So, we all went our separate ways; mine happened to be to Marine Air Group 16, and I worked for the base squadron in MAG 16.

Q: How did you feel about Vietnam at that time?

A: I wanted to do my part. Even though I know there were a lot of people, because by the time I went to Vietnam the war had been going on for about 7 years. So, people were starting to protest and everything else. At that time, they didn't disconnect the person from the war, so it was unpopular to be a Vietnam veteran, as well as the war being unpopular. But my duty was as a soldier; I took an oath to defend this country against all enemies foreign and domestic. There was nothing that happened morally in Vietnam that ever changed my attitude about that.

Q: When you were in Vietnam, did you see combat at all?

A: I flew 120 missions.

Q: What exactly did those missions entail?

A: I flew resupply, which is flying in rations, bullets, whatever they needed out to different units. I flew strike inserts which would take combat troops into a hot area. We would unload them, take back off into the air. Depending on how long the maneuver was going to take, we would either orbit the area or we would head back to a place and land and wait for them to call us to come out. Most missions that I flew were med-evacs, flying out and picking up wounded soldiers and marines and bringing them back to the hospital.

Q: While you were on those missions, what was your general atmosphere, mindset? Were you nervous, anxious...?

A: I went down three times, had a helicopter get hit by gunfire and went down. On one of them, we blew a rotor; that was pretty interesting, and we went down. The other one, I'm not sure how we went down, memory has faded on that. But, yeah, those times you go down, you start to think about being a POW. I think that's the only thing that really scared me, and I know a lot of people that will say if anybody tells you they weren't scared in war, they're a fool. I really was never scared when we went out

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on any mission. I was scared when we crashed, because I didn't want to be a POW, but the mission, I was trained, I knew my job, I was a professional.

Q: So, when you were in Vietnam, did you have an image or kind of a feeling of what you thought it was going to be like? Did you have expectations and were those expectations justified?

A: I think everybody probably does that, and if anything, my expectations were a lot harder than what the reality was. I was trained for more; do you remember now, when we were trained it was a unit going over as a whole unit to be a grunt, down in the boonies and rice-patties unit. I got transferred to the air wing, I had a building to sleep in, I had warm food three times a day, so yeah, it was a little bit cushy.

Q: Tell me about some of the other men in your unit, like I know you said you were transferred, but how did you guys feel about being, I mean obviously you spend literally six months or so together training. What kind of bonds do you form there?

A: That is interesting. There is one person-- his name was Shirley Ball. He was a guy named Shirley; I don't know why his parents named him that, but Shirley and I had gone through boot camp together. We literally were all the way together, even to Vietnam, and he did go to a grunt unit, so we visited each other a couple of times during our tour. His was in a lot of the day-in day-out combat. That's pretty rugged. So, I would say he had a lot harder job than I did. I don't think my job was a cakewalk, but it was nothing like being out in the boonies.

Q: Were you or any of the men you served with, were any of them treated differently based on race, gender, any kind of discriminatory factors?

A: Not really, you know, and I've read a lot about that. It's been said that Black Americans were disproportionate to everything else. When you look at the raw numbers, and everything else, you find that simply wasn't true. Education, on the other hand, was a huge difference because people could get a deferment for going to college. That's where the difference, I think, comes in or whether where the misinformation comes in, because the majority of Black Americans did not have the ability to have a college education, so yeah, they faced the draft a lot more than a White American student, but in actual combat and everything like that, the ratio is pretty much the same.

Q: Do you have any significant experiences in Vietnam that just totally stick out in your mind that you'd like to share?

A: There's several, and I don't care to share them.

Q: For your service in Vietnam, were you awarded any medals or citations?

A: Twenty-three times I received four air medals. I received my air combat wings with three stars. And the stars, that's at least 3 times going into a hot place and getting shot at. The Navy Commendation Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Unit Commendation, the Combat Action ribbon, yeah, I have a few.

Q: I'd say that's an understatement. What was the largest hurdle that you had to overcome during your service in Vietnam?

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A: The largest hurdle in Vietnam? Probably dealing with officers that, obviously as an enlisted person an officer outranks me, and they were less than competent.

Q: Moving on, to kind of the lifestyle and on a more personal level during Vietnam. How did you stay in touch with family?

A: Well, technology was not what it is today. I did call home through sho1i wave radio, one time. Most of the time it was just through letters, and then we would do recordings, just like we're doing here and send a recording back. Today, my son's been to Iraq nine times now, and he just gets on his cell phone and calls home.

Q: So, it was very different from what we have today?

A: Yeah. I had a friend of mine who was also a Vietnam veteran who was deployed during Desert Storm, and we would e-mail each other on just how his day went. It was kind of unfortunate, because less than a week after he got back, he died of a heart attack. I feel really bad about that, but communication is really different.

Q: How did things like getting letters or doing tape recordings, did that help you in any significant way with the mental challenges?

A: Mail call and getting packages, or getting recordings is always the high point of any person's day, unless they get a Dear John letter, but I think everybody would probably affirm that it's the high of the day. It can also be a point that there's probably the highest suicide rates, if a person gets bad news from home. Good news is okay, bad news-- nobody wanted to hear about the riots or anything like that because we were there trying to do our part and all it did was let us know that our part was not appreciated back home.

Q: You said you had three square meals a day, which I'm sure was a great boon, considering the atmosphere for some of the servicemen. What was the food like?

A: Food was good. That's one thing I think when the others were eating C-Rations or MREs --out in Vietnam, you had C-Rations or K-Rations, which were freeze-dried, long-term rations. But I don't have any complaints about the food. It was good, we were fed good.

Q: Obviously, you were in a totally different country, a totally different culture. How did you communicate with locals or with natives?

A: Culture shock probably hits you the most. We talked earlier about what your first impression is, I admit you think about that, but you're going into-even though it's a war situation- the same way that I went into Korea: you're going into another person's country. They are your host, so you got to recognize the things that the host country does, and that can be, you know, a little bit unsettling to us. As an example, in most Asian nations, to write your name in red is a death warrant. Any time you sign your signature in red, it means you're going to die. You don't cross your legs and put up your heel, or the sole of your foot when you're facing somebody, that's an insult to them. You accept a gift or whatever they're giving you with two hands, and acknowledge it, as opposed to what we do, kind of a grab and go deal. So yeah, culture shock is a very real thing. They could train better on places you're going to. Our

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culture training was to see the VD and STD films to let us know that you can catch a sexually transmitted disease. That was about it.

Q: How long, obviously it's probably very difficult to say with any 100% sure accuracy, but how long did it take to get over the culture shock? How long did it take you to adjust?

A: Well, because of the unit that I was with, not long. Because we very seldom had, well, we had day-to-day interactions with the Mama San that would come in and do our laundry, clean up our house. She had been doing this for a lot more years than what we'd been there, so her English was great. We could talk very easily. The few times, the few missions I went out on that were classified, we would fly people out, Asians out, to different areas so that they could blend in with a particular village, and gather data and everything like that, it was a little bit different. I can remember flying, we were flying a Korean general around, and at lunchtime we flew into his compound and ate lunch with the general. It was the first time I was introduced to Korean food. I wasn't quite ready for that.

Q: How did the Vietnamese act towards you? How did they treat you?

A: That's a good question, too. I think that the majority of the Vietnamese that we dealt with, and we're talking about the South Vietnamese not the North Vietnamese, they still had a good feeling that what we were doing was helping them out and doing a good job with them. It was kind of the converse; when I went to Korea in 1987, right where the Olympics were. They helped set up Korean security for the Olympics and the Koreans, the majority of the civilian population there, they made no bones about it. They really wanted us out. And that's not publicized a lot, but the Koreans want us to get out. We've been there for sixty years.

Q: What was your kind of day-to-day dress, your clothing and uniform in Vietnam?

A: If we were not flying-- I mean normally, it would be a flight suit. There's a picture, no that's Korea, not Vietnam. If we were not flying a mission, I mean if we did fly a mission, we were in our flight suit; that's the standard Nomex suit that you have to wear. If we weren't, what our section did-- I was in the ordinance section and we built bombs and rockets to go out-- so our uniform of the day generally was a pair of short pants, at-shirt and our boots. It was hot.

Q: How did you entertain yourself while you were there? Obviously, you don't have computers or cell phones.

A: Well, the USO provided a lot of entertainment. For Christmas 1970, Bob Hope came to Da Ming, China and I was one of the lucky ones who got to fly security while he was there. So, I was in a helicopter about 2000 feet above Da Ming waiting to go in and pick him up if anything should happen. The USO, Doughnut Dollies, whatever you want to call them, would come around maybe monthly. The really accepted way of entertaining yourself was to go to your particular NCO club or EM club or whatever and drink.

Q: What did you guys do to take your minds off the war?

A: Drink.

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Q: Drink? What did you do when you were on leave, when you managed to get it?

A: I never, well, yeah, I did, I went to Hawaii for R&R, and I met my wife there. We spent a week together, and I flew back to Da Ming.

Q: What did you think of the other soldiers you served with in your unit?

A: All kinds. I've got good friends out of it, and I've got some, you know, if I'd been in charge of them, I'd pull a Patton on them and probably shot them.

Q: The next question on here, we've already kind of talked about it, is what did you think of the officers that you had?

A: The majority of the officers are well trained; they know their job and everything else. The problem with the officers is, I was in a helicopter squadron, so we had a lot of second and first lieutenant pilots that literally got their commissions out of college, went to flight school, and then were sent to Vietnam. They're the people that really didn't receive proper training, because their training was just to fly a helicopter, but all of the other things that you think of, in terms of leadership, setting an example and everything else like that, the new officers like that, they were incompetent.

Q: Would you ever offer advice? Would they ever come to you, you having practical knowledge, knowing the nitty-gritty, so to speak? Would they ever seek your advice at all?

A: I flew with one pilot, a Lieutenant Williams. I saw him about ten years later. We were in Ireland together, and he was a Maj or then, and he was a good pilot. He did exactly that. He depended on the Crew Chief to get things going. If we were going out on a strike mission, we would always take time to go out early so that we could throw a die marker in the ocean, and then we would fly out to about a thousand feet and both of the gunners, well all three of us gunners, got a chance then to hone in on shooting at the die marker to make sure we were ready to go in and get a hot target. He was good.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say on Vietnam, as far as the war is concerned, before we move on?

A: Well, I think, you know, it's sad that the stigmatism with the Vietnam War-- and a lot of that has changed-- but where it hasn't changed is in the minds of veterans still today. The public, unlike they're doing now, could not separate the war from the warrior. So, when we got home, we were ridiculed, and we were, quite often, faced discrimination and everything else because of going to war. We just never understood that.

Q: What were your first days back home like?

A: I came home on a Friday. I was smart enough to know that it was Friday afternoon and that when we flew into the Air Force base in California everybody was not going to be processed until that Monday. So, for the first time in my life, I broke the law, I went AWOL [Away With Out Leave] Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and I showed up at the base Monday morning, and slipped right in. Nobody even knew anything about me being gone. Two days later, I was a civilian.

Q: What did you do while you were a civilian? Obviously, you told me earlier that you were later in the Army. How much time transpired before that?

A: Well everybody has a six-year military obligation. So, I just finished 2 years of my military obligation. So, I was in the Marine Corps Reserves for the next 4 years. I really didn't, at that time, participate in monthly drills or anything like that. I had a civilian job out in Los Angeles, got married, had two kids, and it was kind of funny. I got my honorable discharge and about a week later I went down and re-enlisted to go into the active Marine Reserves, went into it and was activated to go to Europe. I went to Europe with the Marine Corp, came out, and it was about at that time that I had moved back to Indiana, and I started to go to ISUE [Indiana State University-Evansville, now the University of Southern Indiana at that time, received my Bachelor's degree and I wanted to become a Marine officer, but as I already told you, I was too old to be a Marine officer, so I went to the Army and they said sure, we'll make you an officer, and I took it.

Q: When you went into the Army, what kind of things had to happen? Like how did you go about it, enlisting in the Army?

A: I went to the 163rd field artillery, here in Evansville, a National Guard Unit. I handed them my degree, handed them my discharge from the Marine Corp, and everything else and was all prepared to go to OTS, officer training school. I went to a board in Evansville-- it was made up of five different officers. I was then sent to F01i Benjamin Harris in Indianapolis, and I met with a board of pretty much colonels, who asked me about fifteen minutes worth of questions. They told me to go wait in the hall, about five minutes later, they called me back in, they gave me the oath, and I was direct commissioned. I left that office being a second lieutenant.

Q: How did that make you feel?

A: That's pretty neat. It was actually one of the things, because of the incompetence that I saw in Vietnam, that I had made a promise to myself, that if I ever did become an officer, I was going to be a good officer and not be like them. So, yeah, it allowed me to fulfill a pretty longstanding commitment I had made to myself.

Q: What were some of the first things you did, as a lieutenant? What were some of your first experiences?

A: The first thing that you do, and I was a field artillery officer, so you have to get trained in field artillery. I went to the officer's basic course in Fort Sill. After finishing that, I went to Fort Hood after I got out and graduated from the officer's basic course. I was a fire support team officer. Then I went to become a fire direction officer in a battery. I was promoted to First Lieutenant; I was then the battery executive officer for eighteen months or so. I spent 5 years, all total at Fort Hood. Probably the best time of my life that I ever had. I then went to the officer's advanced course, back in Fort Sill went to nuclear arms school while I was there; and from there, I had orders to go to Germany when I graduated from the advanced course. I graduated from the advanced course, got promoted to Captain, and promptly got sent to Korea, so I don't know where the Germany thing went. As I said, I spent a year in Korea. My work was as an S-5 as a civil military liaison officer between U.S. Forces and the Korean forces. A lot of the

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work that we did was setting up security for the 1980 Olympics. And I came back to the States a year later and was stationed in Fort Riley, Kansas, for about four months before I was sent to Europe.

Q: How long were you in Europe?

A: All total, probably a year, because I was on broken tours each one. We went over to do a specific job and when we got done with that job, we came back. It was never-- it's called TAD, temporary additional duty. I was never really assigned there; I just went there to do jobs and then come home

Q: So, I think that covers the majority of your tours of duty. Describe the day you were finished with the armed services.

A: Sad.

Q: Sad?

A: Yeah, that was a long time ago now, and it still is a daily thought of mine. These are my retirement papers. I still haven't filled them out, but I have to get those sent in sometime this month. I just hesitate filling those out. Even though I'm a retired reserve officer, I think about it every day. My son's in the Army, my grandson's in the Army. It's a family business.

Q: What was it like? I know you said there was an overwhelming sense of sadness. What was it like your first day as a true civilian?

A: It still is like that. I have difficulty dealing with crowds, difficulty dealing with-- and that's funny. Working at University has actually been really good for me even though it's difficult because a lot of the students are not disciplined and that can be frustrating.

Q: What did you do in the days and weeks following your retirement?

A: I got a job here in Vanderburgh County. I was the director of the Vanderburgh County 4-H Center. When I finished that up, my daughter was in the process of getting divorced. That's one of the things that I do regret, my daughter and my son; I missed all their graduations from high school, all the birthday parties, the proms and everything like that, I was always gone somewhere. So, when she got into trouble with her marriage, I moved to Pennsylvania, and I spent six years out there helping her get through everything. Then, my dad passed away, and I moved back to Evansville to be with my mom and my sister and my brother and my other sister.

Q: When you moved back to Evansville, what kind of work did you do?

A: Here.

Q: For those listening, he's currently the University of Southern Indiana housing director of facilities?

A: I am the assistant director of housing for facilities.

Q: Here at USI. I don't know what all the entails; I don't live on campus.

A: It's actually much like the job that I did in Korea where I was the deputy installation commander, the S-5's, the military liaison. I ran a facility that is ve1y much like we have here. It housed about 3500

soldiers. Any time they got into trouble or did anything, I would have to go out with my whole team; it's kind of like an environmental team, to lift the gopher. What that would be, is when Koreans harvest their rice, they literally spread it out on the road so it can finish drying. One of the black hawk helicopter squadrons came in and chose to use that particular road as a landing site, and it literally blew a farmer's whole entire crop to hell and back. So, we went out to talk with the farmer and eventually paid him whatever he would have gotten on the open market for his rice, and just told him how sorry we were that it had happened.

Q: Obviously your military experiences have had lasting effects. You said your experience with the S-5's helped your job here at the university. Were there any other experiences that you can definitely see a transition?

A: Well, yeah. Personally, I get frustrated, the good thing about that is, my military training and the amount of time that I sit there, pretty much prepared me for the job I'm doing right now. As facility manager, it is very easy for me to go out and understand the problems we have in any given unit that we have, when we're building new buildings like Ruston Hall. You know, just sit in on those meetings and make suggestions and that kind of thing and working with the Indiana Department of Environmental Management and the Environmental Protection Agency. We're applying and I'm in the process of writing another grant. We've received four grants for about \$175,000 worth of projects to start environmental programs that didn't exist. So yeah, it helped me.

Q: Do you stay in contact with any of the soldiers that you served with?

A: The last contact I've had was probably 10 years ago. My brother stays in contact. They have a reunion about every five years, but we've never had one because, like I said, when we got there, we were all broken up and sent to other units.

Q: I think that concludes the interview, pretty much. Is there any last things that you want to say, any experiences?

A: No. Other than this Veteran's History Project is really important. I'm glad to see they did it. It was designed after the last of the World War I veterans had passed away. I think there's still half a dozen alive, but it's designed to capture all that history and all our memories, because it's so much more than what classic history schoolbooks tell you. There's just more to it than that, and I think this project is going to help correct that.

Q: Are there any contacts that you have that you think would be appropriate for the Veteran's History Project?

A: Sure. My son certainly would be. I-le is a special forces master sergeant but trying to get ahold of him is very difficult. Around here, at the university, and it's kind of surprising because there's so many veterans here, Steve Selbry, that works in the Physical Plant. He's the manager for the fleet, the USI fleet. He was in the Navy in Vietnam, and he ran on a riverboat, much like you saw in Apocalypse Now where he ran up the river there. I don't think his experiences were like that, but Miles Mann, who is the assistant director at the physical plant was in the Navy. I'm not sure he was ever in combat, but he flew

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F- I 5's off of a carrier. There's a couple of guys down in security. We've got veterans all over here. There's just a bunch of stories here, too.

Q: Well that's the end of the interview as far as my part is concerned. I'll transcribe this for you, and I do want to thank you for your time. I appreciate this very much. It's been a very good experience for me. I've known about the Veteran's History Project for some time, and this is actually the first chance that I've gotten to actually participate in it so, I do want to thank you for your time, I appreciate it very much, and thanks for your service.

A: You're welcome.