David Estrovitz

Master Sergeant

Marines

Meteorologist

St. George, Utah

"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

David Estrovitz

David Estrovitz.

Interviewer

Where are you from originally?

David Estrovitz

Originally from Brooklyn, New York. I went to boot camp at Paris Island. Served in the Pacific during World War II as an aircraft mechanic. I actually got out in March of 1946; spent a few years in civilian life, and came back into the Marine Corps during Korea. During Korea, I was still an aircraft mechanic for a while until I had the opportunity to go to radar intercept school, Airborne Intercept Operator, which I was during the rest of my stay in Korea.

After Korea, we were still flying the F3D Skyknight, known more familiarly to people as "Willie the Whale." And I flew the right seat in that as a radar operator. Did that for a while until a decision was made to change from a two seat Night Fighter to a single seat Night Fighter. The result of that was I was out of a job, me and the rest of a group of 154 who were radar intercept operators. We ranged in rank from— I was doing that as Corporal in the Marine Corps— to we had a couple of Warrant Officers, but most of the people, in fact, almost of them that were enlisted. If you're familiar with the RIO program today, you know they're all officers. But the Marine Corps usually comes in last.

But anyway, since I was out of a job, the Marine Corps saw fit to retrain me as a meteorologist. So I spent the next 13 months learning how to do that, and it was pretty intense. Eight hours a day, five days a week, for 13 months nothing but meteorology. But that started my third career. I left the school at Lakehurst, New Jersey, in 1959.

I met my wife in Buford, South Carolina at the Marine Corps Air Station. Her dad was also a Marine and was stationed there. We were married there in 1960. Surprisingly, and very unexpectedly, 12 days after we got married,

we received orders to Kaneohe Bay in Hawaii for a three-year tour. I says, "Wow, the Marine Corps is good to me." And we spent three wonderful years in Hawaii in Kaneohe Bay.

I was doin' my job as a meteorologist as a weather forecaster. At the end of that tour, we came back to El Toro in California, the Marine Corps Air Station in El Toro. We came back in 1964. In 1965, I got orders to go overseas. I thought I was going to Vietnam, but I went to Iwakuni, Japan, instead and supported air operations from there. I got to back to California again at the end of that tour in 1967. It was late 1966. I'm sorry. Spent about a little over a year there and get orders to the Far East again, and this time, it was Vietnam. And I wound up at Chu Lai, which is an Air Station just south of Da Nang.

Da Nang is a much more familiar name, I'm sure. At Chu Lai, I was responsible for the weather forecast station. I had a group of about 15 people. And we operated 24/7. That meant watches. People would come in and work a watch, get relieved. Another group would come in. Everybody had the same responsibility, though. It was to gather as much information as we could regarding the weather, not only at our station, but at all the perspective target areas that came down as HOP orders to our people in the three squadrons that we had. This entailed weather briefings on a daily basis to the commanding officers of those squadrons. Our responsibility was for the weather conditions at the target, and what they can expect coming home after the mission, and all the weather that they could possibly get involved with en route. Our information was gathered by the known communications systems at the time, most of which were teletype and facsimile.

During that time, though, we had the opportunity to claim a first as far equipment and combat operations. We put an operation, a meteorological van--actually, it was two vans combined. When we talk a van, we talk about an electronic van, which is pretty familiar to most people. They're used for communications primarily. But they reconfigured two of those vans back in Patuxent River, Maryland, tested them there, and sent those two vans to us at Chu Lai. When we received those, we were responsible for putting them into operation, and it also involved the physical aspect of taking these two van's that were delivered to us in a KC-130, taking them out of the airplane, and putting them on our pad at our weather station, and getting them up and running.

The reconfiguration of the vans allowed us a far better capability as far as communications were concerned with the latest in communication equipment and electronics. And the unique feature about the whole thing was that we also had the capability of getting a signal from the first weather satellite that was launched by the name of TIROS. People are familiar with satellites. And we were able to acquire the signal from the satellite about five times a day, and that signal came out in the form of facsimile presentation of the cloud cover over our area. A picture of the cloud cover combined with all the other information that we put together on a regular basis gave us a little bit of a

boost in the capability we had of being more accurate with our weather forecast. And that was the first time--well, it was first for a weather satellite, which was part of NASA's projects as we go along.

Interviewer

You've got this new high tech satellite.

David Estrovitz

Well, yeah, it's the first time we were able to put all that knowledge to use in the field, which is very important. I spent 13 months at Chu Lai, which was a normal tour for Marines at the time, and again was fortunate enough to return to California at El Toro. I decided at that time that I've had enough of wars and the Marine Corps, and put my letter in and retired from active duty in 1970. Transferred to what the Marine Corps calls the Fleet Marine Reserve; spent another ten years in the Reserve; and was fully retired in 1980. Now I'm a civilian and have been since 1980, and it feels good.

Interviewer

Tell us what you saw in Vietnam that was so different from what you'd seen before.

David Estrovitz

I think the best way to put is what I saw in Vietnam was a major step in the evolution of war from the conventional war as fought during World War II to some touches of guerilla warfare in Korea, but it was still a conventional war type situation for the most part. Until Vietnam, where conventional warfare was, for all intents and purposes, thrown out the window in my observation.

What we saw in Vietnam was the full implementation of guerrilla warfare. Guerrilla warfare predominantly says, "If you can control the people--the people being the indigenous people in the area--if you can control them, you can control the results of events." And you saw that happen on a daily basis in Vietnam, and you see that happening now in the Middle East. The problem primarily for our troops with boots on the ground is more often than not, they don't have the capability of recognizing the enemy. They don't wear uniforms; they don't fly flags. They don't meet you in formation. They don't do anything that remotely resembles conventional warfare.

The results of that and what's happening now today is the increased emotional and psychological effect on the troops on the ground. They're faced with situations that they don't find in their books as far as warfare is concerned. All that's changing now. Our officers and leaders are recognizing the fact that conventional warfare is not the way to handle things these days. We've got to adjust, and we've got to recognize that we have to combat the effect that they have on the local population, and we have to try to counter that and change that thinking. That's a very difficult task.

Interviewer

What, in your mind, showed that to you?

David Estrovitz

One specific event that we experienced, we were not in the bush on a daily basis. We had a different responsibility. But even given that, one day, we volunteered to escort our chaplain out to a local village that he was visiting primarily for some support for the orphanage there in the way of medical supplies and some clothing, things like that. To give you an idea how guerilla warfare works, by instilling fear into the local population in terms that if they cooperate with the invaders, that they're gonna be in trouble.

As we got into the village, we got hit with a rocket attack by the local VC. We didn't see them; we didn't know where they were, but we were hit. And the results of being hit, fortunately, none of our crew were hurt, but there was some casualties with the local population. What started out as a humanitarian mission turned out to be a rescue mission, where we were picking up the wounded, mostly children, and evacuating them to our hospital aboard base. We accomplished that. As far as I know, none of them died. They all recovered, but they received some serious wounds, all because we were visiting, and that's the way things went in Vietnam, and that's the way things go when you're faced with guerrilla warfare.

Interviewer

What do you feel about that day and about your mission?

David Estrovitz

Well, you don't feel very kindly about them, of course, when you see children lying wounded. But at that point in time with the Vietnam war having gone on for a number of years at that time, those of us, especially those of us in the more senior ranks--Senior NCOs and officers--we recognized the situation; we knew what it was, and we tried to change our tactics and deal with the situation. As far as what we feel against the enemy, it's hard to feel very much against someone you can't recognize, to point a finger at and say, "He's an enemy." It might very well be the local village leader or it could be a woman or it could be a child that turns out to be your enemy in that given situation. You have to adapt; you have to change, and that's what most of the troops had to deal with during the entire Vietnam campaign.

Interviewer

How long was your tour in Vietnam?

David Estrovitz

Thirteen months.

Interviewer

Did it change from the beginning to the end, what you saw?

David Estrovitz

No, the Marine Corps is pretty well-established in how they do things. A 13-month tour in what we call Westpac, which is the Western Pacific--a 13-month tour is the norm. People who are in-country occasionally extend or request to be extended, and they can do that on a six months' basis. Why they would, I don't know. I didn't. But it's

not unusual for them to come back Stateside for about a year and go back again.

The Marine Corps is unique in the fact that if you're attached to an outfit that's in the Fleet Marine Force, which is that part of the Marine Corps predominantly most of it that is in combat situations, the tour for people in FMF is 13 months, unaccompanied. No dependents allowed. If people are in other units such as embassy, the Guards, things of that nature, state department duty, they can go to a station and bring along their dependents. Their dependents are allowed on anything but FMF. That's the way the Marine Corps functions.

Interviewer

So you're an old salt by then, and you'd been commanding men for a long time. You saw cultural changes taking places in the United States. What did you observe among our own troops in the cultural changes?

David Estrovitz

There definitely were changes. I have some opinions about our culture today, but as far as the people in the Marine Corps were concerned--all Marines, by the way, unless they're going through an officer program, all the enlisted Marines anyway, go through boot camp, regardless of what their future occupation is gonna be in the Marine Corps. On completion of boot camp, they are, number one, a rifleman, whether you're a weather forecaster, a radar operator, or what, you're primarily a rifleman. Your TO weapon at all times is your rifle, or your pistol, or what it happens to be according to rank.

So there's a different attitude, if you will, in people that have gone through boot camp in the Marine Corps. However, one of the other important factors to remember is that during up and through the Vietnam Era, starting in pre-World War II days, most of the people that went into the service were drafted. And that continues through the Vietnam era. People that were drafted, even those that went through Marine Corps boot camp, were of a different culture than those who enlisted on their own volition. Those people that went in because they wanted to be there were different than those who were told they had to be there. So there were some problems.

One of the things that was made available to them by our enemy was drugs in Vietnam, and drugs were a serious problem. They were made readily available through the work of our enemy. So you had to deal with that, too. For the first time, in my recollection anyway and my experience in the Marine Corps that dated back to early 1943, we didn't have that problem. Even though we were drafted, we didn't have that. We had a different cultural aspect, if you will, about why we were there. We were attacked by another nation, and we went to war because of that. Korea was an action that was taken because of our responsibility to the SEATO treaty.

Vietnam was another treaty obligation to begin with. Being drafted for those events as compared to being drafted for World War II did not sit as well with the average young man going into the service. So we had difficulties with

that. But all it meant that we, especially people like myself in all the services that were senior and uncommissioned officers or the first hands-on people as far as your troops are concerned. So monitoring the activity of the troops became an important part of our job in seeing to it that they did not get involved in any of the adverse aspects of war.

Now we have an all-volunteer service, and when you look at the difference between the culture at the time during Vietnam versus that of today, we're talking about two different worlds. The people today that are in an all-volunteer service, we can very well be proud of them. They're doing a fantastic job. The people that served in Vietnam, as witnessed by the fact that some 58,000 never came home, they did one heck of a job also, despite all the adverse conditions.

Interviewer

Was the fact that so many units were coming as individuals instead of units a problem in Vietnam?

David Estrovitz

We came as individuals also in the Marine Corps, although there were unit movements. In fact, our air squadrons came over as units. Even the troops on the ground came over as units. However, once the units were in-country, they're continually being infused with replacements 'cause people die; people get killed; people are injured; people are finished with their tour and go home. So you have a continual turnover all the time.

Cohesion, I can only speak from how we do it in the Marine Corps. During my 13 months in-country, I saw people come and go. I had two different officers in charge. Some of the people in my unit were finished with their tours and went home, and others came in and replaced them. All these Marines went through boot camp, received that kind of training, then were further trained in specialties of some kind or another.

In my case, these young people were trained as weather observers. Weather observer's responsibilities are to do exactly that: observe and record weather conditions every hour where you happened to be. It could be Stateside or in-country. The people who were trained to be forecasters had a responsibility to assemble that information and create what we call a synoptic chart, and it's kind of a weather chart that you see on television showing the whole country and the weather in our country. That happens to be a format that everybody in the world follows, every country in the world. There might be a few exceptions. I can't name them, but for argument's sake, every country in the world is part of the world meteorological organization.

Interviewer

Functionally, what were we doing wrong in Vietnam?

David Estrovitz

I don't know that I could get involved in that discussion without expressing my own personal feelings just about why

we were there. And I don't think I wanna do that in this venue because we don't need any more divisive conversations going on. We have enough of them going on already, and I don't wanna be a part of that.

Interviewer

What we're trying to do is tell people 100 years from now, they'll know what your view is. I'm trying to get into the controversy. What I'm trying to get is what you were seeing yourself.

David Estrovitz

The problem is though, it's difficult not to be controversial, okay, if I wanna be honest with myself. I would suggest a good book to read in answer to your question. Robert McNamara out of the Department of Defense during Vietnam, Secretary of our Department of Defense, post-Vietnam, he wrote a book. I don't know if you've had the opportunity to read it. It's probably one of the better books that you can read to answer your question. And in answer to your question on a personal basis, I would recommend reading that book.

Interviewer

You saw what was going on at home. You saw the protests. What was different from what the press was saying from what you were seeing?

David Estrovitz

Well, while I was in-country, I didn't pay much attention to the press. After my experience in-country, I began thinking beyond my reason for being in the Marine Corps to begin with. My reason for being in the Marine Corps to begin with was purely a patriotic experience for me. But after that experience, one can't help but ask the question, "What are our leaders thinking of when we get involved in a war like we did in Vietnam?" And to be perfectly candid, what are they thinking about today in our involvement in the Middle East? I could go on forever with that.

Interviewer

We'd like you to go on somewhat.

David Estrovitz

People on active duty in the military, people now who are predominantly in the military on a volunteer basis--we have an all volunteer military right now--people who do that and people who decide to make the military a career or at least be involved for a few years, do so because they believe in our leadership. They believe the decisions that are being made that ask us to prosecute foreign policy, for example, they believe that our leaders are doing the right thing. And because they believe that, they want to be there and help do the right thing. Whether we're doing the right thing or not will probably be best proven in the history we read 50 years from now. I'm not too sure we're always doing the right thing.

Interviewer

When did you retire from the Marine Corps?

David Estrovitz

1970. I came home in '69 from Vietnam.

Interviewer

And you saw those images in 1975 of us leaving Saigon in the helicopters. What did you think and feel?

David Estrovitz

It gave me sufficient thought to validate my thinking that we shouldn't have been there in the first place. But that was a decision that was made by our leadership.

Interviewer

It wasn't a good day when you saw that.

David Estrovitz

No, it wasn't a good day. It especially wasn't a good day when I went to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., and I picked out a few names on it of some of my buddies. That wasn't a good day either. We have a great Veteran service organization here in St. George, the Vietnam Veterans of America. They were instrumental in organizing and providing us with the traveling Vietnam Wall. It's a replica of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, and it's put together in a big semi, and it travels the country. People that applied for a showing, there's a cost involved and funds are raised locally to pay for that. It's been accomplished so far twice here in St. George. Well, once in St. George and once in Washington City, I believe. But I've attended both of those here in St. George, and the Marine Corps Leagued Attachment here in St. George, which I'm a member of, provided some assistance by standing watch over the wall during the night to make sure that it wasn't vandalized because many of those displays were vandalized in some areas.

Interviewer

They were vandalized?

David Estrovitz

Yeah. By whom, we don't know. If we did, they'd be arrested. We didn't have that experience here, thankfully.

Interviewer

How did that make you feel?

David Estrovitz

Well, it makes you feel angry, of course, why people would do that. But the attitude of the Vietnam era that was prevalent at the time was that people who were willing to do that. It would make any Veteran angry to see that or witness that. So fortunately here in St. George, we really are not faced with that much of a reaction against the military. Pretty supportive here.

Interviewer

What is that the people who would vandalize a monument angry about?

David Estrovitz

Predominantly, what they think, and what they think is what they've been told by people who would be willing to incite the youth of our country who are easily manipulated, they come to believe that we were wrong to be there; we

were wrong to do what we did while we were there in terms of how we conducted operations. So it resulted in a culture that was not just anti-war, but anti-military and anti-U.S. That was the result.

And the media had a good part to play in that. They contributed to it by making everything known to the public of what was going on by emphasizing it; by showing it on TV and in the newspapers. We didn't have Facebook at the time. They'd probably got much more coverage that way, but they used the media to the greatest extent possible to keep pounding away at this anti-war, anti-military, anti-U.S. attitude. Fortunately, even though it still exists today to some extent, it's not nearly as serious as it was during that time. I was fortunate to even come back. I was fortunate to come back from three wars. But returning from Vietnam, I was even more fortunate than most because we flew into the Marine Corps air station, so I was on a secure ground when I got off that airplane. I wasn't one of those that was spit upon or cussed at when they returned, so I didn't go through that experience. But I'm fully aware of it, and it still makes me angry. I, along with anybody that served in the military, can make this statement: I served, and as far as I'm concerned, I can say I served in three wars. I didn't start any of 'em.

Interviewer

What do you want the people in the future to know about that war from your particular viewpoint?

David Estrovitz

In order for people to really know what the Vietnam experience was, they need to take a hard look at history. The history of that part of the world has been one of turmoil for centuries. Vietnam, which was formally Siam, and all of Indochina and that area, and China itself, India, and what is now Pakistan, which was originally a part of India, that whole area has been in turmoil.

The United Nations in 1954, with the end of the French Indochina War, decided to partition Vietnam at the 38th parallel of South Vietnam. That was part of history. The Vietnamese people, their leadership predominantly--the Ho Chi Minh's of the time--were resentful of that. And their invasion into South Vietnam was an effort on their part, from what I understand of history, to unify Vietnam again in response to the partitioning that was done by outsiders. Outsiders came in and told us how to live in our country. That's what started the Vietnam conflict.

Our involvement started as early as the late '50s through the intervention by small units in support of the South Vietnam Army. And then the whole thing then escalated. So for people who are asking the question 50 years from now as to why Vietnam, the answer I would present to them is what would we do if some outside state or group of states decided that we would be better off with a Western America and Eastern America, and the Mississippi would be the divide? How would we react? If you can give some thought to that, you have the answer as to why Vietnam. That's the best I can offer you.

Interviewer

You said you didn't want to talk about Agent Orange.

David Estrovitz

Well, no, I don't really because it's a very sensitive subject, and I have some strong opinions about it.

Interviewer

Did you have a different opinion about the war at the beginning? Was it different than you thought it was gonna be when you got there?

David Estrovitz

No. I knew it. I kept abreast of what was going on, knowing fully that I was gonna be there one time or another, so I knew what was going on. I had friends that came back from Vietnam that lived the Vietnam experience before I did. So no, it wasn't a mystery to me. I knew what was going on; I knew what I was gonna be faced with. I knew that on a daily basis, I was not gonna be physically involved as much as our infantry people were--the guys that were in the bush that were dealing with the enemy on a daily basis.

In our operation in Chu Lai, we weren't faced with anything that resembled combat per se, but we were still subject to combat operations such as rocket attacks and mortar attacks; people sneaking into the base to do damage. They blew up our fuel dump at one time, so we had to contend with those things also. We suffered some pretty severe casualties in some of the rocket and mortar attacks, but we press on and do our jobs. When I get a set of orders that sends me into a combat area, I expect to be in a combat area, and I fully expect to experience combat in one way or another.

Interviewer

At the beginning of that war, did you have a different opinion of that conflict than at the end?

David Estrovitz

I think the only thing of any significance that I saw change was, as a matter of fact, quite unexpected. The decision was made by our people to end the war. Not to seek surrender, but to end it. That was a big change. That's not anything we had ever done before, and that was significant. It provided a lot of ammunition for the media at the time. It was a failed operation as far as the media was concerned. It was accepted to a great extent by the public, like we shouldn't have done it.

Interviewer

Did he have a different opinion at the beginning of the war?

David Estrovitz

I appreciate the fact that you're attributing so much wisdom to me. When I hear that, I said, "Well, why I aren't rich instead of good-looking?" But to answer your question, what I would propose for the future is for everybody in our leadership in our country should be reminded that their primary responsibility--and even though you hear it

expressed--their primary responsibility should always be protecting this country. Involving our military in how other countries conduct themselves should be taken into consideration very painstakingly. It should not be treated as adventures. War is hell. There's no such thing as a good war. Our leadership should keep that in mind, period.

Interviewer

Great. That's fabulous.