Rod Decker Interview
Salt Lake City, Utah

Rod Decker

Captain

Army

MAC-V

"Escalation"

Interviewer

How do you want your name to appear in this?

Rod Decker

Rod Decker.

Interviewer

What was your rank in the military?

Rod Decker

I was a captain.

Interviewer

When did you go into the military?

Rod Decker

I went in in March of '68.

Interviewer

Did you volunteer or were you drafted?

Rod Decker

When I was at the University of Utah, and was young and foolish, I understood that everybody had to go; that turned out not to be true. But everybody had to go. It was recommended that we become ROTC cadets and then we could go as officers, which is what I did.

Interviewer

Do you remember the day you left to go into the military?

Rod Decker

No, but it was March of '68.

Interviewer

Tell us about your training.

Rod Decker

Well, I'd been in ROTC so then I went to Fort Benning, where I took Infantry Officer's Basic Course. And then I went

to Fort Holabird, Maryland, where I took an intelligence course.

Interviewer

Did you want to go into intelligence?

Rod Decker

Yes.

Interviewer

How did you get to Vietnam?

Rod Decker

Well I got orders to Vietnam, and I had hoped not to go to Vietnam but there they were. So they gave me 30 days leave, and then I got on a plane, and we stopped in Alaska, and we stopped in Okinawa and we arrived in Vietnam. The sun was shining and the afternoon was hot. And they formed us up and we marched down the runway after we left. And as we marched out, another group marched on. And as they passed us they shouted at us about how they were leaving and we were coming. All sorts of ranks were jeering at us as we came into country and I remember that.

Interviewer

How did you feel at that moment?

Rod Decker

Well, I took it in good part. It didn't bother me much.

Interviewer

Tell us about your first assignment.

Rod Decker

I was assigned to strategic research and analysis at MACV J2. We worked in the MACV building, which was two stories, and a basement, and went on for miles of corridors or so it seemed; maybe it was half-a-mile long. It was by Tan Son Nhut Air Base, just on the outskirts of Saigon. I worked in one of the offices, and our job was to keep track or do what we could about the Vietcong infrastructure. In many hamlets, and villages the Vietcong had a shadow government and we were to try to figure out what they were up to.

It was almost all deskwork. Every day when I came to work there was a pile of papers like that. They were largely captured enemy documents. The Vietcong was an Asian bureaucracy, and they had more paper than you knew what to do with. In one six-month period, they captured six million pages of enemy documents. The documents were taken to the combined document exploitation centers, C-Deck in military parlance. And there were long rows of Vietnamese, men and women, who translated these documents. They weeded out most of them as "not of intelligence value." The others went into the system and were read. Some of them came to me, and I read them. There were also interrogation reports, interrogating prisoners of war. There were also agent reports. They had

double agents within the Vietcong.

The agent reports were all funny because they were so obviously made up. They were so obviously false. It was a pretty good gig if you could get to be an agent of the Americans. They would pay you, and you would make up a lie every now and then, but the lies were obvious. And not only that, but the agents knew who one another was, and so they would get together and tell the same lie, see, so it would be confirmed. And so one of them would tell a lie, then another couple of days later, another one would tell the same lie. And so there was a, "My goodness, we've got--" but the agent reports were funny.

We'd read these and then we'd write reports, and we would brief generals. And I briefed William Colby. I briefed Davidson, who was the chief intelligence guy there. One of my friends briefed Abrams; another one briefed Westmoreland. Normally, we would brief colonels who would brief the generals, but sometimes they wanted it straight from the horse's mouth, and they would send a lieutenant or a captain up who'd actually looked at the stuff. I was a strengths guy; I was the strengths guy. Before I got there, the war had been controversial, and the military had not quite known what they were doing or how to figure things out. And Robert McNamara wanted metrics. He wanted defined goals and measurable ways to get there. So there was a time when they said the idea is if we kill them all then they can't fight on. So we will estimate how many of them there are, and then we will have body counts, which became infamous. And we will keep track of how many of them we kill. After they're all dead, the war will be over. It wasn't quite that simplistic, but it was sort of that idea. Maybe they'll give up. We hope they'll give up before we have to kill them all.

But that meant the first step, you note, is to estimate how many of them there are. So one of the categories, they had village guerrillas, they had regular units, they had North Vietnamese who were coming in, and they had Vietcong infrastructure, agents, members of the shadow government. How many of them are there? Well, it was my job to tell them how many. Every month I told them how many there were. There was a guy, his name was Kelly Matthews I think, who had been there before me, who had devised a system to determine how many members of the Vietcong infrastructure there were. It used the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, HES for short in military terminology.

In Vietnam, there was South Vietnam, then there were provinces rather there are states in America. Then there were villages, which were rather like counties and covered all of the ground; everything was in the village. And then there were hamlets, where people actually lived. In the South Vietnamese, they had a province chief, a district chief, a village chief, and a hamlet chief. Americans had an advisor to a province, district. The American district advisor had to fill out a form and they hated it. They were majors usually, lieutenant colonels. They had to fill out this huge form every month. And they thought it was stupid. Maybe it was. And on it every hamlet was listed, and

they had to put down information about how friendly the hamlet was. Had there been any fights? Who did they believe was the provocateur, etc. there? And each hamlet got a grade: A, B, C, D, E I think. Maybe it was 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Anyhow, every hamlet had a grade as to how friendly or unfriendly it was.

Kelly Matthews looked at some documents, and he assigned a number of Vietcong infrastructure according to each grade. So I would take the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, I would multiply the various grades by the various numbers, and that would give me a number. And then there were the top leaders, and I would estimate the top leaders rather freehand, depending on the expertise I had acquired reading captured enemy documents and these agent reports--don't forget the agent reports--and every month, I would turn it in. And Kelly Matthews wasn't there when I was there.

There was a lawyer, a Harvard trained lawyer, his name was David Hope; he was from Philadelphia. And he explained it to me. He went through and explained this sort of in the way I have explained it to you. And then he got it. He said, "Here, you make the estimate." I said, "How do you make the estimate of these higher ups? I don't understand." He said, "Well, you take the Hamlet Evaluation Survey and you look at the documents." "Well, I still didn't understand." He said, "Turn in about the same as last month." And so every month I would do the formula, and then sometimes I'd go up a little, sometimes I'd go down a little. Make a nice pattern. And I was it. The numbers that I had went to the Pentagon, and went into the overall estimate of how many there were, and from which kills were deducted and therefore we knew we were doing well in the war. That was my job. In addition, I did various other reports and stuff.

Interviewer

It sounds bureaucratically surreal.

Rod Decker

We did it every day. No one thought that it had much to do with what was actually going on. But we felt, and I think we were right, that we understood some things that other people didn't because we spent a lot of time reading the documents for some of them useful and you got a feel for things from the documents. And we talked to people and so forth. But no, when you realize I was a captain of intelligence, you begin to understand how we lost that war.

Interviewer

You were there in '68--

Rod Decker

'68 to '70.

Interviewer

Were you there during Tet?

Rod Decker

No, I was there after Tet. Tet was in February, I got there in August. There were still Tet things going on. There were a lot of stories in Tet; there was a guy that I worked with a little bit, his name was Jacobson. He had been a colonel. He then retired and became a high level advisor to Westmoreland. And during Tet, he had been in a quarters, he'd been in his apartment and it was a military thing. The Vietcong came over the wall, and they came into his place and they were banging on his door, knocking his door down. He walked out onto his second floor balcony, and he saw an MP still walking around down there. He said, "Throw me up your gun." The MP threw up his gun. Jacobson caught it. They bust through, bang, bang, he killed two of 'em. And there were lots of stories like that around of people who'd actually had brushes with combat, unexpected brushes with combat.

Before Tet and by the time I left, Saigon was a peaceful city. I would go around town as I pleased anytime and would take these--we call 'em grenade scoops. They were a motorcycle with a seat on the front, and you'd sit. And the guy back there would drive you around; cost you a buck-and-a-half in Vietnamese money. And we had dinner, we went as we pleased around town, saw people, went to parties. There were some foreign-service officers who every year gave a party called The Light at the End of the Tunnel, and they would put out printed invitations and you'd come. And it was just a party but there were lots of parties. And you could go to restaurants and it was a peaceful city. Once the American started leaving, the Vietcong-- by then it was almost entirely North Vietnamese. Tet surprised Americans and shocked them but in fact it damn near wiped out the Vietcong. They never amounted to much after Tet. It was all North Vietnamese regulars who came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Interviewer

Did you see this in the intelligence?

Rod Decker

Yes.

Interviewer

We were talking about the Vietnamese and Vietcong more or less getting destroyed after Tet.

Rod Decker

Yeah, they were. It was very clear that that's what was happening. Everyone knew that. It was in the press. Antiwar people still kept talking about the Vietcong, and how the fact that they were able to continue to fight showed their resilience, and so forth and the determination of the South Vietnamese people to throw out the Americans. But you mostly saw North Vietnamese when you fought, not that I fought but that's what those who did mostly saw.

Interviewer

You're there during the height of the war. We talked to a lot of guys in the field and they don't see the paper, they barely hear the radio.

Rod Decker

No, we sort of knew what was happening.

Interviewer

How did you feel about the demonstrations and such going on at home?

Rod Decker

Well, I went over a dove and thought it was bad, and I came back a hawk. It seemed to me that South Vietnam was a legitimate place, it's country and that the people who lived there, the vast majority it seemed to me, would've liked the communists to leave them alone. And we had made promises to a large number of South Vietnamese who had thrown their lot in with us. And this stood to be in trouble if we left. And it seemed to me that we could hang on, we could do it if we wanted to do it. Now, it turned out we didn't want to do it. But that we could stay and we could hang on and we could make it work if that's what we had wanted to do. So I felt bad when it fell.

Interviewer

Could you see some missed opportunities or things that should have happened?

Rod Decker

No. I don't know that there were missed opportunities. Some people say had we bombed Hanoi. I don't think that would've done much good. Some people said had we invaded North Vietnam. I don't think that would've done much good. I think the only thing that would've worked was patience. We could stay there. It's a cliché to win a battle and lose a war. It's unusual to win every battle and still lose the war, yet we managed to do that in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Tell us what MACV is.

Rod Decker

MACV, okay.

Rod Decker:

Military Assistance Commander Vietnam. That was the name. Westmoreland and then Abrams were MACV. They were the Military Assistance Commander Vietnam, and the name of their command was MACV or Military Assistance Command Vietnam. That was the American military operation there. Now there was huge things that weren't military, enormous efforts. After I did a year in SRA, I transferred to CORDS, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. William Colby was the head of CORDS.

Interviewer

Who is William Colby?

Rod Decker

William Colby's a famous man. He became head of the CIA. As a young man he parachuted into China to get intelligence on the regime and he was a famous intelligence cold warrior, particularly with an Asian hand. And then

he was head of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. I worked in an office and our job was to say how the war was going. Again, we looked at the Hamlet Evaluation Surveys. Our job was sort of this: We would go out and do our own Hamlet Evaluation Survey and compare it to the one that the major had done. And we would say, how good is the data? That was part of our job. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support was an umbrella organization. Throughout the war the people in Washington had ideas of the way to win this guerilla war, win their hearts and minds. And in every idea, there would be a program. For example, there were the RD cadres, these were supposed to be our own guerillas. They were guys who wore black pajamas, and they were supposed to build schools, and dig wells, and do stuff and fight the Vietcong. Well, they sort of loafed around, and they were draft dodgers, and sometimes they would bully the townspeople and it didn't win the war.

Interviewer

These were Vietnamese?

Rod Decker

Vietnamese, yes. Then there were Ruff Puffs. Regional Forces, Popular Forces, that's what they were. And they were supposed to be local guys who were a local militia and would defend the hamlet. And that didn't work. And then there was Phoenix. Phoenix was a program to target the local Vietcong infrastructure, and the Vietcong cadres, and that was a program you could come in and secretly denounce somebody and they'd arrest him. And people denounced guys who'd made them mad.

One saw there what happens if you don't have due process. They rounded up a bunch of people who were innocent largely and they assassinated people. It had a bad reputation. Then they were aiding the police. The police, Americans called them derisively white mice. They wore white shirts, long sleeved shirts, and they tried to help the civilian police. Then they wanted to build schools in the hamlets, and there were programs to go do good works at every hamlet, build a school, dig a well, what the hamlet wanted and there were Americans running around doing that. And there were foreign aid people who gave aid to the Vietnamese. "Bulgur Wheat! Bulgur Wheat! Bulgur Wheat is good to eat! Cook it, fry it, put it in a pan. Ask your friendly USAID man." Okay, that was a jingle. They would feed the Vietnamese kids bulgur wheat, and Vietnamese kids wouldn't eat it unless you put in a lot of sugar. So they'd make bulgur wheat porridge, cook it up and put in a lot of sugar and feed Vietnamese kids with it.

There were other programs, which escape my mind at the time. And all of these programs, somebody would have an idea and so they'd go do something. Then they'd say that didn't work. Well, they wouldn't end the program. The program went on. All of these programs sat around like rusted cars in a wrecking yard. And Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support ran them all, all of the non-military programs and tried to get them to do things. And the guys who were running it didn't know what was going on. I mean they had reports but they suspected the

reports. So they had us try to look and see what was going on. We didn't particularly know what was going on either. So that's what I did for six months. And we read reports largely from the field, and went out to the field sometimes and tried to figure out what was happening.

Interviewer

You went into the field occasionally?

Rod Decker

Yes. The last six months I went out a half a dozen times. I went to Tay Nin, and I went to Nya Trang and I went to--I'm trying to think of the one. I can't think of the one at the top--I went to I Corps, the very Northern most corps, and I'd go around, and talk to people and try to figure stuff out.

Interviewer

You said you went a dove and came back a hawk. Tell me about that.

Rod Decker:

Yes. Well, I tried to explain that. I knew quite a few South Vietnamese, and it seemed to me that first they didn't want the communists to win, and they wanted their own South Vietnamese country and I would say history would've shown they were right. Had there been a South Vietnam it would've now been like, I don't know, maybe like Thailand. I don't know whether it would've been as good as Singapore or Hong Kong, but it would've participated as an Asian tiger, and would've been freer, and more prosperous and happier I think than it is now.

And one would guess that over 20 or 30 years, eventually, something will happen as in China or something, where the party lets go of the economy and then eventually communism will go away. But you have two or three generations who I think would've been better off had we stuck it out. And so I came to believe that. I didn't see the future, okay? It was, to a large extent, and America believed this, especially in academia--I'd been a graduate student before I went--that the communists were a true competitor, that the jury was out on whether in the end they wouldn't do better than a free market or a capitalist society. And it was thought that for, say, a developing country, they might simply be better. That might be the way to do it.

Most developing countries thought that we need state control, and planning to get ahead quickly and that was believed widely in America, at least in part. And then it was thought that the Vietnamese people wanted communism. Now when I went there and talked to them it seemed to me they didn't. Now I didn't conduct a scientific opinion poll, but it seemed to me that communism was where you lived on a collective farm, you got up every morning early and did calisthenics. Now that sounds virtuous unless you have to do it, and then you don't really want to do it, you really want to sleep in and have a job that pays you some money. That seemed to me to be what they wanted. A motor scooter is what they wanted. You could see the country boys and they only had to hear

a motorcycle putting off in the distance, and they knew exactly what they wanted. Cool, if you were cool. Not very many Vietnamese teenagers could do it, but they could imagine themselves as cool, riding a motor scooter down the lane with a girl sitting side saddle on the back, holding onto them. That's what teenagers imagine everywhere and I think that's what they imagined there. And that's what they wanted.

Interviewer

You could see things such as communist atrocities.

Rod Decker

Okay, the communists weren't terrible. They seemed to me that they fought decently. Yes, they killed people they shouldn't have. I'll tell you some things I read in documents. This guy murdered a prisoner of war. They demoted him from first lieutenant to second lieutenant. Well, that seems to me fair. I mean, they didn't approve of murdering prisoners of war. And there were things like that. I mean this was a war, and they weren't perfect but I don't think they were atrocious. I think they fought fair, but given that they were a revolutionary force, a guerilla force they did some terrorisms, some bomb throwing but that wasn't their main thing. Their main thing was they attacked military positions. It seems to me that they were, as warriors go, they were not so bad.

Interviewer

Did you have any concern about POWs?

Rod Decker

Yeah, there was concern about POWs, but again, while they weren't correct with POWs, and while we hear stories of Hanoi Hilton and that was bad, I don't wish to say it wasn't bad, lots worse things have happened in the world. I mean it seems to me that they ought to have done a little better with POWs. Of course I wasn't one, and don't know and I guess they were brutal. But Americans were fairly decent with POWs that we caught but the South Koreans; there were stories that they were brutal with their POWs. I didn't see, but we certainly told stories about it. And there were stories told that ARVN even beat up POWs. ARVN is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. So they were probably worse than we, but part of the reason we were okay is that we had lots of money, you could afford to keep them in barbed wire and stuff, but a decent place and you could afford to feed them as much as you wanted to. And so I don't hate them because they did atrocious things, in fact I don't hate them. If I were judging them I'd say as those things go they didn't do so badly.

Interviewer

Tell me about coming home?

Rod Decker

Well, that was the hardest part. When I came home all of my friends were anti-war, and I got into lots of shouting conversations and I was called a murderer oh, half a dozen times or more. And they just weren't listening, and they shouted, and I would say things and there was a lot of pent-up anger at the war and at the government. And they would yell at me, and that happened a lot, quite a bit. It was sort of my life till the war was over.

Interviewer

Where did your friends get their information about the war?

Rod Decker

Well, they got it from the news media.

Interviewer

Explain what the news media was showing them at this time.

Rod Decker

Well, I think the media in general decided early that it was a bad war. It was clear that the way to make a name for yourself as a reporter was to find an American atrocity. And one of the reasons that I think My Lai was unique was I know that the military looked hard for it. Where I was working we got a directive: Look around and see what you can find in the way of atrocities. And we couldn't find anything like My Lai. Next, every reporter knew that the way to a Pulitzer Prize was to come up with an atrocity. Every reporter looked and none of 'em found it. They found some things, it was a war, but none of them found anything like My Lai. But the incentives for reporters were to--it seemed to me--to find a story that harmed the American cause, or that made the American cause look bad. That's the way it seemed to me.

The best and brightest--what's the guy's name? He was a New York Times reporter. It'll come to me in a minute, he wrote sports. He wrote in that book, and for example, he said, "Well, we of course knew that the generals of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam were in the league with the North Vietnamese and with the Vietcong." How in the world did he know that? He didn't know that. That was just journalist bar talk that he put in his book and it was widely believed. People believed that the South Vietnamese were riddled with informers and so forth. And they may have been. I don't know that they weren't, but surely no American. I know for a fact no American knew that they were. They didn't say, "Oh, one of my North Vietnamese counterpart came and gave me 1000 piastres yesterday." That wasn't the kind of conversation you had with a Vietnamese officer. It seemed to me that the nation turned against the war and people were really angry about it.

Interviewer

Did you have friends who were in combat?

Rod Decker

Oh yeah, I had a lot of friends in combat.

Interviewer

Did you talk about it?

Rod Decker

We talked about it after we got back and some of them saw bad things. They saw prisoners getting killed or beat up. They saw cases where civilians were killed and they felt bad about it. And one understands that. And there were

civilians killed. They tried, I think, for most of the war, most of the time, troops tried hard not to kill civilians. Sometimes they did. It was said that we bombed civilians. We tried hard to be careful not to bomb civilians. Sometimes they got bombed, but we tried hard not to do it. I don't know.

The guys in combat, there isn't one thing they said. I don't even know how to summarize what they said. There were some who felt the war was criminal, that we were over there, and we were hurting the people and we were killing people we ought not to kill. They felt that way. There were others that felt that it was a reasonable war and we were fighting it as best we could.

Interviewer

How did you feel when you saw the fall of Saigon on TV?

Rod Decker

Well, I felt bad. I wished that it hadn't happened. I hoped that people got out. I hoped that people I knew got out.

Interviewer

You had mentioned the vast number of South Vietnamese working there.

Rod Decker

Some of them got out and some didn't. And some who didn't were killed, and others went to labor camps, or re-education camps and we forgot about them.

Interviewer

I think you mentioned broken promises?

Rod Decker

Well, I said we'd made promises. It seemed to me that from Eisenhower through Ford, we had sort of said, "If you'll come to our side we'll stick up for you." And then we went away and left them. I think that was too bad.

Interviewer

How do you summarize this war to today's young generation?

Rod Decker

Well, we sort of got into it not wanting to and there was never a clear decision. Eisenhower sort of propped it up. Kennedy said, "Let the word go forth. We will pay any price, bear any burden." And Vietnam was part of the price and the burden. It seemed to Kennedy, when he became president, that the communists might be winning the Cold War. He began four intercontinental ballistic missiles, more than any other president did. He tried the Bay of Pigs in Cuba. He had the Cuban Missile Crisis and he greatly enlarged the American presence in Vietnam. He believed that--vigorous "viga" was one of his words. He believed that "viga" would help the American cause. And then he was killed and Lyndon Johnson took over.

Johnson's people were Kennedy's people; he didn't change any people and he continued the policy. Some people

say Kennedy would've pulled out. Might be true, I don't know. But everything he said was, "This is a cold war, and we're going to fight and we're going to win." Everything he did was, he was the archetypical cold warrior, from Cuba, to intercontinental ballistic missiles, to Vietnam. He fought where he could fight. But he didn't make a decision that we were going to stay in Vietnam. Continually, he said, "We'll do a little more and that will probably be enough." And Johnson never said, "We're in Vietnam, we'll do a little more and that will be enough."

They had the draft then. I said how I got in ROTC because I thought I'd be drafted. It was disruptive of young men's lives and it made them mad. And so they were mad at the war, and mad at the draft and mad at the country. Part of it was demographic. A huge cohort of young people became 18, 19, 20 at the time. Some of them became hippies. Marijuana was new and romantic. They changed the music. They changed their styles. They said, "Don't trust anybody over 30," and they had their own way. Vietnam was a case where most of the young people I knew who were my age thought that it was terrible. A lot of people, maybe half a dozen times people said to me, "We're as bad as the Nazis. What we're doing there is as bad as anything the Nazis ever did."

I remember one conversation with a guy. I said, "If you believe that, why don't you leave?" He said, "You! You can't throw me out!" He threatened to hit me. I said, "Well no, wait a minute. If I had seen the Nazis coming in the 1930s, I'd have left Germany, if I'd had been a German and seen them coming. If you see it, why don't you leave if we're really that bad?" And he said, "We're really that bad, but I'm an American and I have a right to stay here." Well, okay. And that was said. I went to a party in Chicago. I went to the bathroom and on the inside of the toilet seat, there was the lid, it was America spelled with a "K" and lots of swastikas. A lot of people felt not just that this was a bad war, the way people felt say about Iraq, but that we'd become an evil country, and that we were doing evil things and that we needed to be opposed, needed to be defeated. And a lot of people felt that way.

Interviewer

What were your interests when you were young and entered the war? Describe your character back then.

Rod Decker

Well, okay. I had graduated from the U and then I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago. I was a graduate student in political science there. So I hung out there for two years before I went in the Army, and then I went in the Army and was two years in the Army. Then when I was done, I said, "Let me out here," and I went home the other way. I went home through India and Europe and so forth. Then I went back to graduate school. But I was a lousy graduate student, and I sank to journalism.

Interviewer

How old were you back then?

Rod Decker

When I entered--'68, so I was 26 when I entered and 28 when I left.

Interviewer

After you went to OCS...

Rod Decker

No, that wasn't OCS. It was Infantry Officer's Basic Course. OCS was hard. Infantry Officer's Basic Course was easy. Everything I did was easy.

Interviewer

When you went into the intelligence, did you have specific training for that?

Rod Decker

Oh, they didn't. No. I had six weeks of intelligence training at Fort Halibird, Maryland. And what it consisted of was they pretended--it's called a Battalion G2, that's the intelligence officer and he's a lieutenant colonel. And I would be his lieutenant and they would say, "We took fire from here, what do you make of that? Here's a captured enemy document. What do you make of that?" And they sort of ran us through a scenario for six weeks. But nobody knew very much. You could tell a guy who was full of BS easily because he was somebody who knew something. COSVN was the headquarters. It might have been mythical. It was the headquarters of the Vietcong. It was in Cambodia. And some people would go over, and they'd say, COSVN's here and you knew the guy was a liar. Anybody who claimed to know very much, you knew they weren't telling the truth because nobody knew very much. And that was true of the guys who taught us intelligence. You just went over there and did what they told you.

Interviewer

Did you feel like you were navigating through the fog of war?

Rod Decker

Well, okay. It was clear that we didn't know very much, and it was clear this guy, David Hope, the Harvard lawyer, "Just turn in what you turned in last month." About the same, you changed it a little bit. And he understood. Almost all of us understood that and I think maybe the higher-ups did too. But they had to fight the war. It isn't like you say, "Well, we don't know, so what are we going to do?" It's like, "We don't know, but we've gotta do something, so here's what we'll do." That's almost always the way it is with soldiers. They have to act with bad information and they have to do the best they can.

Interviewer

In real time?

Rod Decker

Well, yeah, they're getting shot at.

Interviewer

You mentioned you sank to becoming a reporter. Has the media had an effect on the way wars are fought now?

Rod Decker

Yes, surely. There is a story from Ceylon. What's it called now? Myanmar? There's a story there in the New Yorker

that to kill the Tamil Tigers what the government did was throw out all the media, throw out all the international organizations, and then kill a lot of people, wipe them out and that stopped the insurgency after years of not stopping it. The Romans weren't bothered by insurgency because if you were an insurgent, they came and they killed all the men and sold the women and children into slavery. That fixed it. You can't do that anymore and that's what asymmetrical warfare depends on. That's why people who aren't as strong militarily can be as strong overall, because they can throw bombs and hide. And you can't just kill the whole village, as other people have done. I don't know whether we would kill the whole village if the world weren't watching, but we surely don't kill the whole village with the world watching. We did it once at My Lai and we can't do that anymore. And that's true generally of the stronger side. Probably it restrains the Israelis even, the militarily stronger side. So it isn't like the bias of reporters or anything matters. It is like the stronger side can't exert the full measure of its strength. It is no longer possible to make a desert and call it peace.