Roger Clawson

Salt Lake City, Utah

Lieutenant Colonel

Commanding Officer

"Escalation"

Interviewer

So give us your full name.

Roger Clawson

Roger Lowell Clawson.

Interviewer

And where were you born?

Roger Clawson

I was born in Price, Utah.

Interviewer

You grew up there?

Roger Clawson

I lived for a couple of years in Castle Dale, and then my folks moved to Hiawatha during World War II to work at the coal mine there, and my father was involved with the coal mining operation. And then when I was six years old, my parents separated, and my mother moved me to Salt Lake City, where I attended grade school and moved out to Kaysville when she finished her degree as a teacher. And I finished my years growing up there in Kaysville and attended Davis High School.

Interviewer

How did you get into the military?

Roger Clawson

Well, my mother not making too much money, and not having the money for a college education which I had always wanted, I was attracted to a Naval ROTC scholarship that was being offered to high school students, and I applied and was accepted and attended the University of Utah with a Naval ROTC scholarship.

Interviewer

What year did you graduate from the ROTC program?

Roger Clawson

1960.

Interviewer

And did you go in the Marines?

Roger Clawson

Yes, at that time you could apply for a Marine option, and so I applied for the Marine commission and was accepted and was commissioned a Marine 2nd Lieutenant in June of 1960.

Interviewer

Were you in a particular area of specialty?

Roger Clawson

Several different specialties, I first applied for and was accepted into flight training, but while attending flight training they gave us a test, an altitude test, in which my sinuses developed a terrible block on descending rapidly and so they ruled me ineligible physically for a high performance aircraft. And so I requested to be dropped and was assigned to a tank unit at Camp Lejune, North Carolina, and I spent six months in the spring of 1962 just before the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out as a commanding officer of a tank platoon.

Interviewer

What kind of tanks were they, M-48?

Roger Clawson

Yeah, the old M-48A1s, yes, 16-cylinder gasoline engines.

Interviewer

That's a very interesting year to become all that. Had you heard of Vietnam by then?

Roger Clawson

No, I had not until a year later, 1963. I resigned my regular commission, took a reserve commission, and while attending reserve meetings, the active duty Marine officer there had served as an advisor in Vietnam and told me that the day was coming when we would be fully committed to Vietnam, and that's when I first became aware that we would probably be headed towards an engagement there.

Interviewer

Walk us through your life through getting to Vietnam.

Roger Clawson

Okay, well not long after I joined the reserves, my wife and I one evening looked at each other and said, "I think we made a mistake getting out of the Marine Corps," and she said yes, she had enjoyed it as much as I had, and so I applied for, and I was accepted back into the Marine Corps in July of 1964, and was sent to Camp Pendleton, California, where I was put in an infantry battalion that was undergoing training to be sent to Okinawa to replace one of the battalions that was in Okinawa. So we finished our training in March of 1965, and left by ship, arrived in Okinawa in April, and at that time they had already committed two Marine infantry battalions to Vietnam, and in June of 1965 our battalion erceived orders and we were sent to Vietnam.

Interviewer

This is so early in the war.

Roger Clawson

Yes, it was. We were one of the first units in.

Interviewer

Tell us about how that all happened and how you got there and what's going on.

Roger Clawson

Well, we arrived at the Da Nang Air Force base, which was built by the French during their occupation of Indochina and we were assigned to protect the perimeter of that air base. That was our first assignment. I was flown in with the advance party from Okinawa there in mid-June and so I was one of the first in our battalion to arrive there in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Did you go by military transport?

Roger Clawson

Yes, we were flown in by a military aircraft, yes.

Roger Clawson

Well, the Viet Cong made quite an effort to keep us from there, and so they made a number of attacks, and I think tactically we made a lot of errors in fighting the Viet Cong early on in the war, which resulted in a numerous number of casualties.

Interviewer

You were in the middle of this bomb?

Roger Clawson

No, I was back with the battalion commander and his staff and so I saw very little combat action. Most of the action took place with our infantry companies. We had four infantry companies with some 200-something-odd men, each that were sent out to patrol and engage the enemy wherever they could.

Interviewer

What happened to you?

Roger Clawson

Well, at one time while one of our companies was out, what we called a sweep through a village, to see if there were Viet Cong there, and had arms stashed and what have you, they went through a village a number of miles south of Da Nang, a village called Cam Ni, which became famous by photograph by Morley Safer who was with that company, and that photograph showed a Marine setting fire to a thatched roof with a Zippo lighter, and it made the cover of Time magazine and basically went all around the world as part of the news campaign to discredit what we were doing in Vietnam. In actuality, there were Viet Cong that had come out of that hut, and it was a refuge for

them and so that's why it was set on fire. It was not just an indiscriminate act.

Interviewer

Was there optimism at that time in the military that we could get it done?

Roger Clawson

Yes, we thought we could. The intelligence estimate was there were about 20,000 Viet Cong that were dispersed throughout South Vietnam. Of course they were armed and controlled by the North Vietnamese, and so, yeah, there was a great deal of optimism that we could bring that under control rather quickly. But what we didn't realize was that they had an awful lot of support out in the countryside, and during the day they would be dressed just as normal peasants working the fields and so it was very hard to distinguish who was the enemy and who was not.

Interviewer

When was this?

Roger Clawson

We're still 1965, early 1966.

Interviewer

Walk us through some more of what unfolds.

Roger Clawson

Well, we started out with some rather awkward restrictions on what we could do. We could not have a round in the chamber. We could not shoot unless we were shot at and then a few months later they lifted that restriction. You could have a round in the chamber, but you had to have your weapon on safety, and again you could not fire unless you were fired upon and that went on for a number of months before they realized what a ridiculous restriction that was. It was costing lives, and so we were...

Interviewer

Why?

Roger Clawson

They were just concerned about collateral damage, civilians being shot and killed, and of course there was a lot of that, unfortunately, in every war. We could not use artillery fire to prepare an area that we were going to move into, again, for fear of causing unnecessary civilian casualties. And in some respect, that's not a bad policy, but on the other hand it really restricted how we could maneuver and the tactics that we could use.

Interviewer

We were hobbling ourselves.

Roger Clawson

Yes, mm-hmm, and of course we were restricted from going into Laos on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Cambodia, which of course there were a lot of secret operations that did go into Laos and Cambodia. I know several people that were involved in those. And of course the demilitarized zone we could not go into and yet the North

Vietnamese used that extensively to prepare for attacks upon us.

Interviewer

Explain that.

Roger Clawson

The demilitarized zone, that was a zone that was set up when Vietnam was partitioned after the end of the Indochina War and the communists then took over the north, and the non-Communists were allowed to then go south, and establish their government, and this was a buffer zone between the two countries just like the demilitarized zone in Korea, the North and the South Korea.

Interviewer

This was supposed to be a neutral zone?

Roger Clawson

Yes, a neutral zone, but of course it wasn't. It was used extensively by the North Vietnamese, and we restricted ourselves from bombing in that area and it cost us a lot of lives.

Interviewer

Keep telling us about the timeline.

Roger Clawson

Well, I was there until April of 1965 when I received orders to return home. Most of our tours of duty were for one year, and then I was sent home. And I reported into the Marine Corps recruit depot in San Diego and was there with their Communication Electronic School, a member of the staff. And about a year and a half later I received orders, I had applied for a graduate school in the information systems field and was accepted and sent to graduate school 1968, '69. When I graduated, I received orders back to Vietnam in August of 1969, but just before I executed those orders, the Marine Corps changed them and sent me to Okinawa instead for a year without my family as they were pulling all the Marines out late 1969. By early 1970 there were no Marines left Vietnam.

Interviewer

Tell us about why fighting in Vietnam's geography and climate was difficult.

Roger Clawson

A lot of it was jungle, which is of course dense growth, and very difficult to see your enemy, and to carry out operations, and not be surprised, and ambushed and there were a lot of cases in which our troops were ambushed. We also set up ambushes of our own along known Viet Cong routes. Rice paddies were very extensive, and here again you were channeled. You had to go along the dikes. You couldn't wade through those rice paddies, and the Viet Cong knew that, and they set up mines and booby traps on these dikes. And we had a lot of casualties from mines and booby traps and snipers that you didn't see the enemy. You were just taking casualties, and you had no way of closing with them and fighting with them unless they happened to launch a large attack.

Interviewer

What was the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

Roger Clawson

That was their main supply route from North Vietnam down into South Vietnam, and that trail came in through Laos, Cambodia, and then terminated down west of Saigon near the Cambodian border, which they then built a series of tunnels to transport their equipment to come in very close to the populated areas around Saigon.

Interviewer

You were there during a time when we were discovering this new kind of warfare.

Roger Clawson

Yes, it was a very unique type of warfare and so we had to set up our training back in the States and in Okinawa at our training bases there to cope with this new environment, in which we rapidly built up training facilities in order to do that.

Interviewer

The themes changed and evolved Vietnam, and you had a perch at a very early time.

Roger Clawson

Yes. Well, again, we thought that it was going to be a rather short war. I was very positive about that. In fact, while I was there, we brought in another Marine division south, a place called Chu Lai, and there was-- they went on a large exercise in which they killed and captured a very large number of Viet Cong from rather organized units there. And I thought, "Well, this war's going to be rather short. We're going to take care of them rather rapidly, and that'll be the end of it," not realizing that what was going on was North Vietnamese were sending North Vietnamese Regular army troops down and putting Viet Cong uniforms on them pretending to be indigenous Viet Cong, but they were North Vietnamese Army Regulars.

So we continued to pour great numbers of manpower into South Vietnam. And what was going on, which was really sad, was that the intelligence estimates were being manipulated such that the American people were led to believe that there was a rather small number of Viet Cong in there. So when the Tet Offensive in 1968 broke out, and we saw what large numbers of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese personnel were in South Vietnam, the press felt that, and of course realized that they'd been lied to and felt that then this was a great victory for the North Vietnamese, which in fact it was a terrible defeat for them. They lost a considerable number of people. In fact the commanding general of the North Vietnamese forces later on many years after the war in his memoirs stated that that was a terrible defeat for them, and they were ready to pull out of the war. But when we ceased our bombing within a week or two after the Tet Offensive bombing of North Vietnam, they took heart and decided to continue on. He said if we'd have continued the bombing for one more week--and he told this to a friend of mine who ran into him in a tour in Vietnam a number of years ago--he said, "We would've quit the war." So it was such a tremendous series of mistakes, no clear objective when we went in. We resulted in 58,000-plus lives that were lost and for no positive

outcome, as you well know.

Interviewer

Can you explain why it was important for us to draw a line in the sand?

Roger Clawson

Well, yes, when the Kennedy Administration, and this was continued on in the Johnson Administration, neither one of them wanted to see all of Indochina fall to a communist rule. China was agitating and feeding the guerilla movements that were going on post World War II. Ho Chi Minh of course became a hero to the Vietnamese people by leading the war against the French and finally defeating them. And so it looked like we would see Thailand, Cambodia, Laos all fall into communist hands, and that's why they decided to go in there and stop them in Vietnam, and if we stop them there, then we would keep the rest of Indochina free from communism.

Interviewer

This was critical for the survival of the United States at that time?

Roger Clawson

Well, certainly to our interests in the Pacific. Whether it was critical to the survival of the United States is, I think, very problematical. I don't believe it would be, but we've seen events as they've occurred, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the fall of communism Russia, which would've I'm sure taken place regardless whether Indochina would've been communist or not.

Interviewer

We didn't know that at the time.

Roger Clawson

No, we did not, and of course Indochina was a rather strategic area as far as rubber, which was very, very important to the West and so we just felt it was important to stop them then.

Interviewer

Was there a divergent reality between the news media and what you would see in-country versus in Vietnam?

Roger Clawson

Well, of course I left Vietnam before the anti-war movement really got underway, and when I got home there was no spitting on the troops. There was none of the terrible things that were done. However, there was one incident that did disturb me greatly, and that was while I was in Vietnam, I had been able to make a radio communication with my wife over the amateur radio network that the Marine Corps ran. Fortunately she had just talked to me because that very night she got a phone call in the middle of the night by somebody pretending to be an officer at the headquarters of the Marine Corps in Washington, D.C. telling her that I had been killed. And while that disturbed her greatly, she also knew that it was not true. She had just a few days before had been to a briefing at Camp Pendleton for all the wives in which the Marine Corps said very emphatically, "You will never, ever receive a phone call on a casualty notification." The Marine Corps always sent a personal notification with an officer and a chaplain

to the home of the wife or parents to notify them of the wounding or killing or the death of their son.

Interviewer

Why would someone do something like that?

Roger Clawson

Again, it was part of the anti-war movement because they took it out on the troops thinking that we were perpetrators of crimes against humanity, I guess, in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Could you see beginnings of all this when you were over there?

Roger Clawson

Yes. We were just beginning to see that, but the steam didn't really get rolling and the press really taking it up until after I'd returned home.

Interviewer

Did you have any dealings with the press?

Roger Clawson

No, I did not personally, no, other than I knew that Morley Safer had been assigned to go on an operation with one of our companies.

Interviewer

What were you feeling after you returned home and watched everything?

Roger Clawson

Yes, as the time went on, and the war dragged on and on, you just got more pessimistic about what was going to be the outcome of that war. We had tied our hands. We were allowing military supplies to come in from Red China to North Vietnam at the docks at Hai Phong. And while we were bombing many parts of North Vietnam at the time, we restricted Hai Phong Harbor from military bombing and that was where they were receiving all their supplies. If we had given notice to the Russians and the Chinese to get their ships out of there, and we had completely destroyed the docks there, we would've made, I think, quite a dent in their ability to reinforce their ammunition and war supplies. So we kind of tied one hand behind our back.

So it was really difficult to watch what was going on there. Of course and then in 1972, the treaty was signed with North Vietnam in Paris, and we felt then that the war was going to be over, and the North Vietnamese pledged that they were going to end the war. Well, the same time Congress then voted to not continue military aid to the South Vietnamese, and they were holding their own with the units that the North Vietnamese were still up in the northern area. And without the military supplies, they slowly began to suffer defeat after defeat 'til Saigon fell in 1975. Now, my personal feelings when Saigon fell, I could not talk to anybody for a week. I was so angry that I was just closed off; didn't even talk to my family when I saw that the all men, who were my friends in college, who had been killed in

that war for nothing. It was very, very difficult for me to deal with.

Interviewer

Those television images of Saigon, have you seen them?

Roger Clawson

Yes, I've watched those. I knew people who had been involved in the evacuation, and it was a terrible thing.

Interviewer

As the war progressed, what are people in the military saying?

Roger Clawson

Well, there was mixed reaction there. I remember one of the commandants in the Marine Corps speaking to us there in San Diego in 1966 saying, "Don't knock this war. It's the only war we have." As I look back on that I thought, "What a terrible thing to say. Why would we want any war?" And I had some of my colleagues who felt being in combat was the best thing that they could be doing in their career. I saw just the opposite. I saw the armed forces there--we were there to be a deterrent to war, and war was not to be desired at all. I had never had any desire for that. If I had to fight, fine, but only as a last resort, and certainly nothing that I wanted to be involved in if it could be avoided.

Interviewer

Was it hard to be in the military as popular culture turned against the military?

Roger Clawson

Yes, it was to some degree, but we were rather insulated on the bases there where we lived, and the communities surrounding those bases were very friendly towards the armed forces, and so we didn't see a lot of that so it didn't affect me too much.

Interviewer

You must've seen everything on TV.

Roger Clawson

Certainly what I saw on TV was very disturbing.

Interviewer

How were your children influenced by it?

Roger Clawson

Well, they were quite young during the war, and when I left in 1964, I left two little girls behind not knowing whether I would ever see them again. And to this day when I see these troops returning home to their families, I get very emotional recalling when I returned home to my two little girls and my wife. I retired in 1980, but they didn't see a lot, but again they were attending many times schools on military bases and schools in the communities that were there, and so they didn't see a lot of that or have to deal with it.

Interviewer

Did the Marine Corps change because of Vietnam?

Roger Clawson

Well, certainly we did change the way we taught our officers, and enlisted and how we trained them for the eventuality of wars like that in the future. So, yes, it did change the mindset of the type of combat that we would be facing in the future. We just had not been prepared for that type. The Marine Corps had come out of Korea, again, with pretty well conventional warfare being fought there, and we just were not prepared for Vietnam but today we are very well-prepared for that type.

Interviewer

You had World War II equipment.

Roger Clawson

Yes, we did. Yes, I went in there with the utility uniform that we used in combat that was not camouflage. Those were issued in early 1966. And our boots, we didn't have the proper boots, which were finally issued to us that could withstand the water and dry out quickly, much of it with nylon in it. So no, our equipment, I had World War II communications equipment, which took a great deal of effort to keep going, and so it was quite an effort to keep vital communications going, which of course is extremely vital in a combat situation.

Interviewer

What about intelligence? Did that change?

Roger Clawson

I didn't see a whole lot there. I wasn't involved in the intelligence effort. Much of the field intelligence was gathered by what we called our force recon people and they had some interesting experiences. Two of my good friends who were in force recon in Vietnam, and it's too bad you can't get the stories from one of them. The one that would have been available here in Santa Clara died last October. Very, very close friend and outstanding combat leader.

Interviewer

You were just beginning to use helicopters, too?

Roger Clawson

Yes, helicopter tactics. Well, they had been somewhat refined in Korea. We moved a lot of troops around with helicopters, but helicopters became extremely vital in Vietnam in order to get us in. Intelligence would tell us that there was a sufficient Viet Cong, North Vietnamese force there to engage and so then we would helicopter the troops into a landing zone hopefully that was secured. Many cases we took a number of casualties going into those landing zones and many of our helicopters were shot up pretty badly.

Interviewer

These were very early helicopters.

Roger Clawson

Well, by the time we were in Vietnam for a few months, the Hueys, UH-1Es had come out, which everybody, I think, is quite familiar with that helicopter.

Interviewer

Tell us about it.

Roger Clawson

Yeah, it carried about ten troops, and it was fast and it could get in and out rather quickly. The Marine Corps also had brought in the CH-46 helicopter, which is that twin rotor helicopter that held about 30 or 40 troops. And that also facilitated greatly moving our troops around and so the helicopters were an absolute vital component of the war effort.

Interviewer

Does the sound remind you?

Roger Clawson

I get a knot in my stomach every time I hear them, along with fireworks.

Interviewer

Tell me more about that.

Roger Clawson

Well, because of the explosive rounds and the fact that helicopters took you where you really didn't want to go. It just brought back memories that were unpleasant to deal with. And of course the exploding of fireworks, in some cases when I first heard those right after I returned home from Vietnam, I just really got almost sick to my stomach.

Interviewer

Your base was under attack by rockets?

Roger Clawson

Very seldom did we get hit. One evening, late at night, we got hit with mortar rounds, but they were directed towards an observation post up atop one of the Marble Mountains, and so most of those rounds hit the mountain, and not our command post but we were fortunate that we were not hit. I had a few sniper rounds go over my head one day. And the closest I came to being killed was from friendly fire. I was laying in my bunk one night when one of my 81 millimeter mortars misfired, and I lay there listening to it whistling down on me not knowing where it was going to hit or which way to go and finally it hit about ten feet outside of my tent with a thud. It was a dud. Those things have a killing radius of 25 yards, so I might not be here talking to you today if it had been a live round.

Interviewer

Friendly fire?

Roger Clawson

We had a lot of casualties from friendly fire, accidental discharges by Marines who were not being careful with their

weapons. We had a lot of that early on. I remember picking up a dispatch off the tele-type one day, which some misdirected 4.2-inch mortar rounds, which are very heavy mortars, had been misdirected and they landed in a Marines' command post right in the chow line. Over 19 Marines were killed and many more wounded. And many times aerial assault, when you were bringing an aircraft to bomb or strafe the enemy, we would get bad coordinates and you would end up strafing or bombing friendly troops. So it was just a fact of war that mistakes are going to be made. We refer to it as the fog of war. The best laid plans, when the shooting started, usually went out the window and you had to improvise from then on.

Interviewer

Vietnam was a multi-service effort we'd never seen before. Tell us how that changed things.

Roger Clawson

Well, of course Da Nang was used by both the Air Force and the Marines, and the Air Force has their aircraft that were used mainly for aerial support of the Army, and also the Marines but Marines also had its own air craft close air supposed. We've always had a very close team. Every Marine infantry battalion has a senior Marine pilot, a captain and a couple of lieutenants who were pilots. They were signed to that battalion in order to coordinate air support for that battalion, and it was all done very carefully and hopefully without casualties, too, from friendly fire.

Interviewer

The Marines had been an all volunteer force.

Roger Clawson

Yeah, in World War II, draftees, in Korea, draftees, and there was draftees still coming in when Vietnam broke out. And there was a real problem of many of the draftees, and in fact towards the end of the war, there were some very serious racial incidents that happened, race riots both within the Marine Corps and other units there in the Far East and Okinawa. There were some pretty ugly situations there from the draftees.

Interviewer

I would like some personal accounts while on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Roger Clawson

I was, of course, never near the Ho Chi Minh Trail so I cannot give you personal perspective. I had a good friend who had been trained with a group of men to reconnoiter the Ho Chi Minh train for possible use of man-packed nuclear weapons, and so he was out in that area quite a bit, but, yes, there was an incredible amount of supplies that came down that Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Interviewer

Man-packed nuclear weapons, this is how people were thinking.

Roger Clawson

There was some thought about it. Of course they were never used. I want to assure you of that.

Interviewer

But it shows what we're trying to struggle with. Why would someone consider that in the mix potentially?

Roger Clawson

Well, again, because of the threat that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was to us, the fact that we were respecting the "neutrality of Laos and Cambodia," but so that we were wondering how the best way would've been, and to stop the flow of weapons coming down and man power coming down that trail and so that's why they were looking at any possibly that might be used in regard to that situation.

Interviewer

There was a time in the early '50s when we thought nuclear weapons dominated everything.

Roger Clawson

Yes, we thought that the only enemy that we would be facing in the future would be the Soviet Union, and if that was the case, since they also had nuclear weapons, that we would probably need to prepare for an all out nuclear war, and also an all out ground war in Europe, and that's why NATO was formed, and why we had so many troops stationed in Europe, that we looked forward to the fact that the only war in the future that could possibly happen would be an all out war with the Soviet Union, and its aligned states and so we were not paying much attention to areas like Korea and certainly not Vietnam.

Interviewer

Your job was to protect the air base?

Roger Clawson

Yes.

Interviewer

What did that entail?

Roger Clawson

We would build bunkers all the way around the perimeter with heavy-duty logs, wood and sandbags, which were then lookout outside the perimeter. And then we had our machine guns set so that they crossed each other so that what we called your field of fire was set up so that if an enemy was spotted, there was no place around the perimeter that they could come through without exposing themselves to our fire. We did have some rocket attacks that destroyed a number of aircraft at Da Nang Air Base, but as far as I know there was never an assault by Viet Cong or North Vietnamese forces again that air base as long as the Marines were in the country.

Interviewer

Did you have any scary experiences?

Roger Clawson

Well, as I said, the hairiest was one night, we had just moved south of the air base. Another battalion had taken over. We were several hundred yards south, had put up our CP in a children's cemetery. It's kind of a sad situation

because in Vietnam, up to 50 percent of the children throughout the time had died before the age of two and so they had special children's cemeteries there. One night some of the Marines on the air base thought they had spotted some Viet Cong trying to sneak through the wire, and they'd open up fire, and the machine gun rounds were flying through our command post and hitting our tents. And I spent most of the night hugging the ground, and one of my radio-men was hit in the leg and had to be evacuated the next day. But that's probably the scariest moment, was from friendly fire for me and that, and of course that 81 millimeter mortar round that night.

Interviewer

Tell us about how you felt about civilians. You didn't know who was who.

Roger Clawson

That's correct. Many times the Viet Cong were not in uniform. They would sometimes solicit children to sell us cold drinks that had ground glass in them. You had to be very careful. You never knew when somebody might be a Viet Cong. And so when we would go through and sweep through a village, we'd round up civilians who we thought might be Viet Cong and ended up being interrogated. And sometimes at interrogation, especially--we didn't do this, but the South Vietnamese did--they would take two or three Viet Cong suspects up in a helicopter quite high, and then they would throw one of them out and say, "If you other two don't talk, we're going to throw you out." And that was a tactic used by the South Vietnamese, which I certainly don't approve of and I'm sure the American people wouldn't have. But you just did not know when you went through a village who might be Viet Cong, and who might not and many of those villages had weapons caches. Many of them had hidden tunnels in which the Viet Cong would hide when you would come through the village and so it was very difficult to determine who was the enemy and who was not.

Interviewer

And still at that point?

Roger Clawson

Yes.

Interviewer

Tell us about seeing a children's cemetery in Southeast Asia.

Roger Clawson

I saw a lot of children who badly needed medical care and a lot of civilians who were hurt and shot accidentally by our troops. I remember going to the battalion aid station one day, and there was a young Vietnamese mother sitting outside the tent holding her infant child and she was crying. And I went in and talked to the doctor, and I said, "What's going on there?" And he said, "That little child is so malnourished it's not going to live," and I had to let that mother know that. And so seeing the children was a very difficult thing. In fact, I was watching a war movie a few years ago, I don't remember which one it was, and an Army individual pulled a pistol and held it to the head of a young girl in a village in order to get somebody to talk. I almost screamed out and jumped up in that movie. It was

all I could do to control myself and then realized it was just a movie and not reality. But, yeah, it did affect me greatly.

Interviewer

Tell us about Vietnam War movies versus reality.

Roger Clawson

Most of them were far, far from reality. There was only one movie that I felt really was truthful in the way it was presented, and it did a very good job, and that was We Were Soldiers with Mel Gibson as the battalion commander. I was there in Vietnam when that incident happened, when the Army walked into that trap. In fact, the North Vietnamese commander was so astonished that they would be coming in there that he thought that there was something going on that he didn't know, and so he delayed closing the trap for a while until he realized that the Army had made a big blunder. They had come in there without proper intelligence. So it was a true account of what had happened. And I was especially impressed by the scenes back home at the Army base where Mel Gibson's wife took it upon herself to make the casualty notifications instead of letting the postman deliver the telegrams in which, then the Army later on, then they adopted the Marine Corps' approach to personal notification instead of by telegram.

Interviewer

What's wrong with the other films?

Roger Clawson

They exaggerated way too much. There was a lot of drug use, certainly among the troops in Vietnam, unfortunately, but they exaggerated the negative aspects of our troops there to a great extent because by in large I think our troops performed magnificently in Vietnam. Senator James Webb gave a speech a few yeas ago before he became senator. He was a Marine Captain in Vietnam, combat leader, and he felt that the troops under his command, and the ones that he saw would compare very favorably to the Greatest Generation that was written by the journalists of the World War II soldiers, sailors and Marines and I certainly--the men under my command, I thought very highly of.

Interviewer

What are the misimpressions people have about Vietnam?

Roger Clawson

Well, I think that certainly there were impressions that we were war mongers, that the troops were committing atrocities right and left, that were certainly played up by the anti-war movement and I think too many Americans bought into that. And certainly it was, being a losing war, left a bad impression on Americans. Just overall, I think it was a terrible mistake and I think most Americans realize that. Maybe the fact that communism didn't continue on, although all of Vietnam fell in '75 to communism, certainly the rest of Indochina did not, so maybe we accomplished something. I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference whether we went in there or not.

Interviewer

Is there anything you want to say that we didn't ask?

Roger Clawson

No, I think we've covered it very well. You've captured my feelings, I think, rather well and I think I speak for many of my Vietnam colleagues as to their feelings about the war. I have many, many friends who served in various aspects of the war. A good friend who was in the Navy, who was a captain of one of those riverboats down on the Mekong Delta. His combat was that he spent many hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

Interviewer

Tell us the realities of combat versus motion pictures.

Roger Clawson

Yeah, much of it was combat patrols in which nothing would take place. There's no kind of action with the enemy, and so patrols day and night. One of my good friends who jointed our battalion and who took over one of took one of our companies was, in the first few days, was in a lot of combat. In fact, it almost unnerved him. He reached a point where he was sitting alone wondering whether he'd get it all together when the company gunnery sergeant came around, put his arm around him, told him, "It's okay, Captain. You'll get yourself together. In the meantime you tell me what you want done, and I'll get it done." That gunnery sergeant could've easily called battalion headquarters and had my friend relieved at that time. But this man went on to earn a Silver Star and acquitted himself extremely well as a company commander. But your first few moments of combat is enough to unnerve most people, especially in the situation he was in, and then the men patrolling night and day, it was wearing them down badly.

Interviewer

A twelve month tour is a long time.

Roger Clawson

Yes, it is, but we were fortunate. A number of my friends served two and three tours in Vietnam, one year each. But today you're seeing now our troops are coming home for sometimes no more than nine months, going back for another nine, ten months. So I see the Marines today as having much more hardship on them and their families than were on us in Vietnam.

Interviewer

If the Vietnam vets had been welcomed home, treated with respect, do you think on the whole their lives might have been different?

Roger Clawson

I think so. I think there were a lot of men who came home with PTSD, which was not being recognized at that time, who if they had had the acceptance of the American people and the families and people in their hometowns, may not have gone on to suffer the homelessness and the problems that so many of them have faced or the years. I

think we all came home with a little bit of PTSD. It just depended on whether you wanted to recognize it and how much it affected your life.