Steven Cantonwine
Sergeant
Marines
Salt Lake City, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

What was your rank when you left the second time?

Steve Cantonwine

I was a sergeant.

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Steve Cantonwine

Steven Howard Cantonwine.

Interviewer

And when and where were you born?

Steve Cantonwine

I was born in July of 1949. I was born at the old Marine maternity home that doesn't exist anymore.

Interviewer

How do you spell your last name, please?

Steve Cantonwine

C-a-n-t-o-n-w-i-n-e.

Interviewer

Did you grow up in Salt Lake City?

Steve Cantonwine

Grew up in Salt Lake City.

Interviewer

Where'd you go to high school?

Steve Cantonwine

I did my first two years at Cyprus High School, and then I graduated with the first graduating class at Kearns High School.

Interviewer

Tell me about your life before you went in the military.

Steve Cantonwine

I was the oldest of nine children, and actually, the ninth one didn't come around until after KayAnne and I were

married. Mother stood in our wedding reception line kinda bulging. Grew up in Kearns. For the most part I think I had a good childhood, a good life.

Interviewer

And when did you go into the military?

Steve Cantonwine

I actually enlisted in March of 1967 while I was still in high school. It was what they called the 120-Day Delay Program. So I was a Marine Corps reservist from the end of March until I went active duty on July 21st.

Interviewer

1967, correct?

Steve Cantonwine

1967.

Interviewer

You didn't enlist alone, did you?

Steve Cantonwine

No, I didn't. There were 75 of us from Utah that all enlisted together. We were the 1967 Utah platoon. There was a 1966 Utah platoon, and there were a couple after. But I was with the 1967 Utah platoon.

Interviewer

How did that come about? Did you all know each other?

Steve Cantonwine

No. The recruiters were trying to put together a platoon of young men all from Utah and have us all go through recruit training boot camp together. So we were scattered primarily from Orem to Logan. There wasn't many from southern Utah.

Interviewer

You marched in the Days of '47 Parade, right?

Steve Cantonwine

Marched in the Days of '47 Parade. We took our oath in the rotunda of the state capitol on July 21st, and then on July 22nd and 23rd, the recruiters had the 75 of us out there trying to teach us the basics for marching and staying in step and staying in line. And we marched the route, and when we got to Liberty Park we didn't stop. We marched straight onto the buses and the buses took us to the airport.

Interviewer

Why did you enlist?

Steve Cantonwine

I'd always wanted to be a Marine. You know, most kids when they're younger, they play Army. I never played Army. I always played Marine. It was something I always wanted to be. I think part of it was because being the oldest of

that many children, I locked horns with my father quite a bit. That was not a great relationship. And I think a big part of my wanting to be a Marine was because he was so dead set against it. But I became a Marine.

Interviewer

Why was he against it?

Steve Cantonwine

He was a merchant seaman in a CB during World War II, and I think one of the reasons we locked horns is my dad and I were a lot alike in some ways. And he did some time onboard ship in the ship's brig in the Marines, or the guards on the brigs, on naval ships, so not fond memories of the Marines.

Interviewer

Did you go to Camp Pendleton, and how did you get there?

Steve Cantonwine

There were a couple of buses, and they took us out to the airport. And we got on the plane. We flew to San Diego. The Marine Corps recruit depot - a lot of people have an error here between Camp Pendleton and the Marine Corps recruit depot. They're two different bases. The Marine Corps recruit depot's located about 40 miles south of Camp Pendleton. And when we got on the plane, all of us were very quiet. When the plane landed at San Diego, the stewardess got on and thanked the Marine Corps platoon for flying with them and asked us to remain seated while the rest of the passengers got off, and informed us that a representative from the United States Marine Corps would be onboard the plane shortly to welcome us and give us directions.

Interviewer

So this was a training platoon consisting of mostly Utahans?

Steve Cantonwine

It was all Utahans.

Interviewer

What was that like?

Steve Cantonwine

We probably had it easier than most platoons down there. The average platoon was 75 to 80 recruits. We probably had it easier because if we didn't know a person, we knew somebody who did. And I knew several of the people in the platoon, and it's life-long friends. I still see a few of 'em.

Interviewer

Did you all know you were going to see combat?

Steve Cantonwine

As crazy as this might sound, most of us that enlisted in the Marines were hoping to go to combat; that's why you enlist in the Marines. So yeah, most of us knew we were going. Most of us were assigned infantry-related occupational specialties.

Interviewer

And what were you assigned?

Steve Cantonwine

I was assigned as an 0311, which is infantryman, straight leg.

Interviewer

And tell us how you got to Vietnam. When did that happened? When did you actually go to Vietnam?

Steve Cantonwine

We arrived in recruit training on July 24th, of course 1967, and I turned 18 on July 25th. That wasn't a great birthday party. But we went through our training after we graduated from recruit training. Then we all went to Camp Pendleton. And every Marine, after he completes recruit training, must go to a minimum of two weeks of infantry training. Every Marine's a rifleman, that's why we don't have our own medics and our own chaplains. Once we got there, all of us went through our two weeks of infantry, basic infantry skills. And then those of us that stayed infantry went to what they called Basic Infantry Training School, also at Camp Pendleton. And it lasted four weeks, and that was for people that are going to be in the infantry fields: cooks, motor transport, disbursing, all those others. They stopped after their two weeks of infantry and then they went to their own schools. Then after we completed our four weeks of what we called BITS, we all went home on leave. We all had 20 days' leave. And some of us took an extension, took a five-day extension.

Interviewer

When did you actually go to Vietnam?

Steve Cantonwine

I landed in Vietnam on Christmas Eve of 1967.

Interviewer

How did you get there?

Steve Cantonwine

Everybody goes to Okinawa as the debarkation point. And in Okinawa, word came down that because of the Christmas truce and the cease fire that nobody was gonna be going to Vietnam until after January 3rd. Well, a C-130 military aircraft became available, and they took, I think it was about 36 or 37 people alphabetically, and my "C" put me right up there. So I left Okinawa and flew in on the 24th of December.

Interviewer

Where'd you land?

Steve Cantonwine

Landed at Da Nang. The C-130, it's a cargo plane. As the ramp went down with our sea bags on it, there was a guy, I thought he was an idiot. You can't hear a thing, and he was running behind the plane yelling something and pointing. And we landed in the middle of a rocket attack at Da Nang. The rockets started coming in as we landed.

So everybody was just grabbing a sea bag and running for shelter, getting the sea bags off the plane. After the all clear sounded, we all got our own sea bags and then went and reported to the division, either 1st or 3rd Marine Corps Division, whatever your orders called for. And that's where we went and reported.

Interviewer

What were you thinking during all of this?

Steve Cantonwine

I still had expectations. We couldn't hear the rockets impacting. There wasn't a lot of 'em. Da Nang's a pretty big base. So still had some expectations. When I knew I had really gotten into trouble was when I went to 1st Marine Division to check in and they said,

"We're assigning you to 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines."

And I says, "But you're 3rd Marine Division. My orders are for 1st Marine Division." And 3rd Marine Division operated basically from Phu Bai north. They had all of the bad stuff.

First Marine Division could count on some showers. And he informed me, "Yeah. But 2nd Battalion 3rd Marines are now under 1st Marine Division control and that's where you're going." So when I reported in, there was a sign right outside the battalion headquarters. I can't remember exactly how it was worded, but it was, "Leave your sea bag. Before checking in go to supply and get a helmet and a flak jacket. Then return. Welcome to the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines Rent-A-Battalion." And that was our motto was rent-a-battalion. We seemed to go wherever we were needed the most as the war went on. And I thought, "What did Mrs. Cantonwine's son get himself into?" I was a little nervous.

Interviewer

When did you finally get into combat?

Steve Cantonwine

I read a lot on the Vietnam War. I was a mortar man. I was a PFC. I didn't know anything except what the higher ups thought maybe I should know. But I remember going out towards the beaches. We were set up right outside Da Nang. And I remember we pulled a patrol out towards the beaches. And I remember a booby trap going off, and I remember the company commander being pretty upset. And there wasn't much left of the Marine that had stepped on the booby trap, and the captain carried the remains all the way back. And I found out later when I read the book "The Class of '67," which talked about Marines from Officer Candidate School that graduated in '67, this was one of our lieutenants that had arrived in-country probably two weeks before I had. And company commander took that death pretty hard. But he carried him all the way back rather than all a medevac in for him.

When I first reported in to Foxtrot Company 2-3, Fox 2-3, Corporal came out of the duty hut. He yelled, "Where's Cantonwine?" And I said, "I'm Cantonwine." He says, "Come with me." His name was Gary Banks, and he is from here in Salt Lake. I've tried to make contact with him; he has no desire to associate with anybody from Vietnam. But he pulled me out of the straight leg infantry platoons and put me with the 60-millimeter mortars. He was the section

leader. So I generally was with one of the platoon command posts or the company command post. I didn't do very much patrolling. But about my second or third patrol, and the only time I came under fire, we were moving down a ditch, and it was about six-foot high on the one side. And our point element triggered a booby trap, and they happened to be a friend of Gary's. Gary told us all to stay put and he went running up to the point man. And a severe foot injury, old booby trap. And while Gary was up there, he took a sniper round in the shoulder so he was medevaced. But I remember when that sniper round came over, one Vietnamese sniper, and there were about 111 of us, and I ducked down, I fastened my helmet, I fixed my bayonet. I just knew this crazy guy was gonna run across 50 yards of open water and jump into the ditch we were in and land right smack on top of me. Everybody else around was opening up C-rations, sitting down and having a meal. But that was the first time I'd heard a round fired in anger in my general direction. It got a lot worse later on, but that was the first.

Interviewer

How did it get worse?

Steve Cantonwine

It got worse later because we started advancing north and moving north. And I had seen some dead NVA and dead Viet Cong, and I'd seen some injured Marines. But we started moving north. The further north we moved, the worse it got.

Interviewer

What do you mean worse?

Steve Cantonwine

The contact with the enemy. Down around Da Nang there wasn't that many North Vietnamese soldiers, well-trained soldiers. It was primarily Viet Cong guerrillas. We moved up around Phu Bai, started encountering North Vietnamese soldiers. These were the remnants of the divisions that had attacked Hue City.

Interviewer

During Tet?

Steve Cantonwine

During Tet. Tet actually opened while we were still outside Da Nang, and we watched the opening barrage of rockets lift off not too far away from us. They wouldn't give us permission to fire because it was a friendly village. The tanks didn't have the same problem we did, they opened fire. And the next morning, we had a bunch of bloodied bandages floating in the river, so the tanks did some damage. But when we got up around Phu Bai and actually moving north of Phu Bai we started encountering North Vietnamese regulars, and these men were well trained, well armed, uniformed. They were soldiers, plain and simple.

Interviewer

Talk about the Vietnamese regulars.

Steve Cantonwine

We had a point company on Operation Pegasus, which was the operation to break through to Que Son during the siege of Que Son. They took our flak jackets away from us because they felt they hindered our movement. We couldn't move as fast with our flak jackets. And 26 Marines needed help, and that's just what you do. By the time we finally got outside Que Son, 26 Marines had done exactly what they were supposed to do, and they had held off the North Vietnamese, and the North Vietnamese were in retreat. B-52 airstrikes played a big role in that. As we came to Que Son, our mission changed, our objective changed and we began scouring the hills and the mountains just strictly for intelligence. There was still a lot of North Vietnamese movement, but at that point we were finding bunker complexes that had been destroyed by B-52s. And the thing you have to understand with B-52s, when they come in with their bomb runs, it's not just the shrapnel that kills. The concussion kills more enemy than the shrapnel does.

Interviewer

Have you seen a B-52 strike?

Steve Cantonwine

Oh, yes.

Interviewer

Would you describe for everybody what it looks like?

Steve Cantonwine

When we know one's coming in or when one starts, we always lay down and we put soft dirt under us because you're laying there and you're watching it, and as the distance, you'd just watch from one end to the other as dirt just begins coming up. And you see the dirt coming up, and then you hear the sound and it just sounds like a big, long roll of thunder. And then the ground starts shaking. And this is from two or three thousand meters away; you know, a mile, a mile and a half away. And it's actually beyond description. But you sure do a lotta cheering. So lots of dust, and then we move in and check the bunkers for intelligence. Probably the second worst part of my tour the first time was the intelligence gathering because we would go into these areas where the bunkers had all been bombed. And the North Vietnamese, I admired their ingenuity for the way they built the bunkers; even their individual fighting homes. We learned a lot from them on those. But we'd go into a bunker. We could tell when we were getting close to a bunker complex because of the stench, the smell, just putrid. The smell of death was just overwhelming. And then when we'd start finding the bunkers, we'd go in and we'd look for maps, papers, anything that could give us any information on units we were facing.

Interviewer

What made it so bad?

Steve Cantonwine

Well, the stench made it bad. You go out and you smell dead deer, you get around a dead deer that's full of maggots, that smell a thousand times worse. But then when we'd get inside the bunkers, we'd have to go through

the pockets on these uniforms. And quite often, I'd say more often than not when you'd go into a bunker, it was almost like a fight with the rats. You'd see a North Vietnamese sitting up, not a mark on him, just the stench. But as you'd start moving in, he'd start moving. The uniform would move and a rat would come out. That's what made it bad. The rats were horrendous. The rats were bad.

Interviewer

How long were you there?

Steve Cantonwine

In Vietnam?

Interviewer

In that area.

Steve Cantonwine

That area? Probably the middle of April to the end of May.

Interviewer

Had you changed by then?

Steve Cantonwine

Had I changed? I found myself a lot more callous about a lotta things.

Interviewer

Like what?

Steve Cantonwine

You'd see a buddy hit or injured, and it was better you than me, you know. And then when you'd see the enemy, we'd laugh at it. There's no second place in combat, you either win it or you lose it. The worst thing we had happen was right at the middle of May. We were on a patrol. We'd helped set up a fire base, and it was LZ Hawk. I didn't think I'd ever have a hard time remembering that name. But there was no showers, there was nothing there. And you'd almost just assume be out in the field in the bush as to be at the LZ because it was a target area. And we were on patrol, and we'd just picked up a new man, Dave Cancilla. Dave and I still talk every so often. We email each other constantly. But our first platoon got ambushed moving down the crest, a ridgeline. And my mortar section was back with the 2nd platoon headquarters, and they called us up to join the command Company CP. Company CP at that point, because we were still moving, was on the slope of a hill facing where the ambush had come from, but there were two bomb craters into the side of the hill and they were right close together. And I remember Dave and I jumping into the bomb crater with the company commander and setting up the mortar to fire. And we had a sniper with us. They had a sniper, and this guy was good. He'd hit our gunny in the head. Anything that was exposed he was taking out. And the gunny had jumped out of the same bomb crater we had just jumped into and was running back to get a medevac set up for our 1st platoon people. And they hit him in the head. Gunny

Ziegler.

Interviewer

How did that battle go?

Steve Cantonwine

This sniper was good, their sniper. I felt helpless. They were bringing their wounded and their dead up the face of the hill and coming past us, and the sniper was leaving them alone. They were out of the fight. If he'd have started shooting at them, then the men trying to walk with the wounded and the dead would've left them where they lay and joined the fight again. And I remember them looking down at us as they walked by and I felt helpless. But then their sniper hit our sniper. Now, I'd seen a lotta dead. I'd seen a lotta dead Marines and I'd seen a lotta dead North Vietnamese. But this was the first time I watched a man die. And he was lying on the edge of the bomb crater and the NVA sniper round passed through about two inches of dirt and hit him in the chest. And when it hit him in the chest, it jerked him up to his feet and he spun. This was a heart shot, so the blood was pumping out; sprayed me right across the face. And he said, "I'm hit. I'm hit. Oh, my God, I'm dead!" and fell over and he was. And that was the first man I'd actually watched die in combat. Ten days later we were back on that same ridge. We had 88 men. They hit us with everything. And our company commander was Lieutenant James Jones, and he went on to become commandant of the Marine Corps and head of the NSA. That was General Jones. This was when he was Lieutenant Jones.

Interviewer

You say they hit you with everything they had?

Steve Cantonwine

They hit us hard. Our LP, which is a listening post, is a big difference between an LP and an OP. OPs are out at daylight and they're generally a couple hundred yards away from the perimeter just observing. LPs at night, they have to be quiet. And they're listening for noise, and you don't talk to 'em on the radio. They talk to you. They'll contact you if they need to, but you don't ever call them.

All of a sudden, we started getting word from the LP,

"Buku gooks. Buku gooks."

And then an explosion. And one of the sappers had jumped on top two of the LP and detonated his chargers, killed both of them. And they're on the hill. They were inside our perimeter before we even knew they were there. And they had fired a green star cluster flare to start the attack. And Lieutenant Jones says,

"I wonder what a red star will do?"

So they fired a red star. That stopped the enemy attack. It completely baffled him because here they were already inside our perimeter, but that was their signal. The green flare was a signal to launch the attack. The red flare was a signal to stop the attack. And they couldn't understand why I was being stopped. And it took 'em a few minutes to gain control over their men, but once they did it was still a nightmare. This is one of the things I have my nightmares

about today still. They came upon one of our corpsman that had four wounded Marines he was trying to treat that were now outside of the perimeter because we had bent our first platoon back into the second. They went in and they shot those four Marines in the back of the head and shot the corpsman in the head. His helmet deflected the round. It grazed him, but it knocked him unconscious. When they left him; they thought he was dead. And by the time the fight was over the next morning, we had taken over 400 RPG B-40 rockets fired into that little compound, that little perimeter. There were 88 Marines and Navy corpsman when we set up that night. We had 15 killed and 44 wounded by the time Echo Company came in and relieved us the next morning.

Interviewer

Can you go over the statistics again? By the time dawn came.

Steve Cantonwine

Well, it wasn't even dawn. It was 11:00. We had 88 Marines and Navy corpsman that started, and by the time the fight was over, by the time Echo Company got in and relieved us, there had been 15 killed and 44 wounded.

Interviewer

What were you doing through the fight?

Steve Cantonwine

We started out trying to fire a 60-millimeter mortar illume. I didn't have an M-16 because was carrying part of the mortar tube. And I was with the company CP, so it was fire our rounds, spacing 'em so we don't burn up our mortar tube. But that was what we primarily did during that was fired illumination. Que Son Artillery wouldn't fire support for us, and we were only a couple thousand meters away from 'em. And some very harsh words got said over the radio. Que Son Artillery did eventually fire for us, but by doing so they dipped into their reserves so that if they were hit they had no ammo for themselves.

Interviewer

Did you pick up a weapon at any point?

Steve Cantonwine

I did. I picked up an M-16, one of the dead. We were out of illume rounds. You couldn't see anything. You were firing more at sound. Chief, who was our mortar section leader at that time, he had us all shut down on the mortar. He had a thermite grenade to drop down the tube if it was needed. But he picked up a rifle, I picked up a rifle. Dave already had a rifle. And we just helped try and secure the company command post if anybody came through right there. I used a KA-BAR.

Interviewer

You really had to use it hand to hand, huh?

Steve Cantonwine

Yeah. My KA-BAR has a bent tip. One of the North Vietnamese I hit, I hit him in the magazines they wore across their chest, and it bent the tip of my KA-BAR. You know, moms don't wanna hear what their 19-year-old sons are

capable of doing in those situations. You kill whatever way you can to stay alive. It was within a day or two after that battle. And what surprised us was they didn't break off at dawn. They continued their attack even after we had fixed-wing aircraft, we had the rotary aircraft, the helicopters. 'Cause we were able to bring those in at daylight and control 'em. They still didn't break off, and that was very unnatural for them to continue in a pitched battle after daylight. It just wasn't something they normally did. There is a book out on that called "Foxtrot Ridge, a Battle Remembered." In fact, it's written by the man that killed the North Vietnamese sniper ten days earlier. I can't think of his name right now.

Interviewer

Were all the Utah guys still with you at this time in the platoon?

Steve Cantonwine

Oh, no. Oh, no.

Interviewer

Did you have any kind of relationship with people from back home in this platoon?

Steve Cantonwine

At this point no. There wasn't anybody from that Utah platoon in with us on Foxtrot Ridge. There had been a couple with 2-3 that had been wounded down in Da Nang. But none were with us on the ridge. I wanna state this, too. This is some of the most frightening. I wasn't that scared that night until it was over because you're going on adrenaline. When it's over, you sit down and then you say,

"I did that. That could have happened to me."

During that ten days between our initial contact on the ridge and being overrun on the ridge, we went down to Bridge 35, it was the first bridge outside Que Son. And minesweeping teams used to leave from Que Son and from LZ Hawk and they'd work towards each other, generally meet about Bridge 35, and then they would go back. If they got hit, ambushed, it depended on who they were closest to as to where the reactionary force came out of. They always had at least one tank with 'em. This is one that still bothers me a great deal. We'd go out, and the North Vietnamese had 170 or 175-millimeter artillery pieces in Laos that we couldn't shoot at. But they had most of that Route 9 zeroed in. And when these guys would get hit, either ambushed, artillery strike, whatever, whoever was closest went out as a reactionary platoon. When you would get there, you didn't have time to treat the bodies with the respect that they deserved, the respect they needed. It was just hurry up and get the bodies - and unfortunately the body parts - just get 'em onto the truck so it could get outta there before the artillery opened up on you again. And I was more scared then than I was on the ridge because there's more fear, I think, in the apprehension than what's actually going on.

Interviewer

Talk about your relationship to KayAnne.

Steve Cantonwine

I was very much in support of the war. I was very much in support of my government. I was raised to believe that if my government asked me to do something, right or wrong, it's my government. Thankfully, I've grown up. I love my country. I don't always agree with what it does, with what the people who lead it do, but I love my country and I would die defending it. I very firmly believe that. KayAnne and I, we've known each other since she was three or four and I was four or five. And during the summer months after my sophomore year in high school, her family was up visiting, her aunt and uncle, which is how I knew her. We used to race tricycles. But it was long drive from Cedar City to Kearns, you did not have freeways then. And so they'd drive up, and whenever they came up they'd stay for two or three weeks. Well, KayAnne would play with my sisters, about the same age. So she'd play with my sisters. That summer between my sophomore and junior year she came over and we looked through the yearbook and we got a little snuggly and made some good memories.

Interviewer

So were you writing her?

Steve Cantonwine

No.

Interviewer

I mean when you were in the Marines.

Steve Cantonwine

No. No. That was just that summer. It was just a summer romance, but I still saw her when she'd come up to visit. When I came back from Vietnam the first time, I was very close with her aunt and uncle. And I went across the street to see them on the day that I went to report back to Camp Pendleton in my uniform and KayAnne was on the phone. And I said,

"How about making me a deal?"

And she says, "What's that?" And this was January 29th. And I said,

"If you're not married when I come home for Bob," who was my brother, just younger than I am,

"If you're not married when I come home for his graduation, you'll let me take you out to dinner." She says,

"I won't be married and you've got a date." And what'd happened was when I came home, I looked across the street and saw this Blue Nash Rambler parked in Ruth and Dern's driveway, and I asked my little sister,

"Whose car is that?" And she said,

"Well, that's KayAnne's." I said,

"Really?" She says, "Yeah. But she's engaged and she isn't going out with anybody." And I said,

"Oh, okay."

So after she said that, well, I went over to see her and, you know, see Ruth and Dern and say goodbye. I called a couple of months later and Dern answered the phone. And I says,

"Hey, Dern, is KayAnne there?" He says,

"No. What the hell took you so long to call? She sent the engagement ring back the day after you left." So I asked her dad if I could have his permission to ask her to marry me, and he said on the one condition that I wait until after the first of the year so he had vacation. That was in November or September. So I didn't know if I'd remember a wedding anniversary, but I just knew I'd never forget the day I left Vietnam the first time, which was January 3rd of 1969. So we got married January 3rd of 1970. And I am so, so grateful to her. So we were married on my second tour when I went over to Vietnam the second time.

Interviewer

And you did or did not write letters to her the second tour?

Steve Cantonwine

Oh, yes. Wrote letters, spent a lotta money on telephone calls.

Interviewer

What was your attitude about the war your second tour?

Steve Cantonwine

You know, my attitude towards the war, and it would have to go back, my attitude really started changing after my first tour because I lived in a village with the villagers. I slept in their homes, I ate their food, I worked in the fields with them. And it was what they called the Combined Action Program. And I felt very bitter towards our government when they pulled out and started leaving these Vietnamese villagers hanging by a thread that had done so much to help us. My second tour in Vietnam, my bitterness was towards the Air Force.

Interviewer

Why is that?

Steve Cantonwine

Because in the Marine Corps, if I got caught anyplace and I didn't have my rifle and ammunition with me, I could be court-martialed. And all of a sudden, here I am on an Air Force base where I have to keep my rifle and my ammunition locked up in the armory, and the only time I can have it is when we're under attack. And then I have to go get it and go back out and try and round up people that have already gotten to the armory and help make a defense set up that way. The Air Force would not let us have our weapons. The Marine Corps mindset, that was just absolutely ludicrous. But it was their base. You'd follow the orders you were given.

Interviewer

What were you doing, working security?

Steve Cantonwine

Yeah. They couldn't have anymore infantry in Vietnam, so they took India Company, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines from Okinawa and re-designated us as Marine Aircraft Group 12 Forward Security. They took us from Okinawa and sent us to the Bien Hoa Air Force Base to provide security for the Marines that had the planes there.

Interviewer

Did your attitude towards the war change?

Steve Cantonwine

Just towards the way the government was handling the war. I did not like it. And my attitude is if we're going to be in an armed conflict, then our politicians better get their nose out of it and let the generals fight it. And I firmly believe that with all my heart, and it's the politicians that have caused the majority of the problems because they set the limits. And you can't have limits when you're fighting for your life.

Interviewer

The friend of yours, is it Michael Yeates?

Steve Cantonwine

Michael Yeates.

Interviewer

Tell me about Michael Yeates.

Steve Cantonwine

Mike and I were sophomore and junior years at Cyprus together. And I saw Mike when I was leaving Vietnam, and he was killed approximately two months later. I think he was killed in March. But I always liked Mike. He was one of the big star athletes out at Cyprus, and I wasn't really an athlete, more of a girl chaser, I guess.

Interviewer

So was Mike a Marine?

Steve Cantonwine

Mike was a Marine. And it's funny because the first time I saw Mike, I had to look back at when I first got in Vietnam when I was at Da Nang with my sea bag waiting for transportation out to 2-3. I'm sitting there and I'm looking at these guys carrying their rifles and wearing their helmets and their flak jackets, and they're all stained with white from the sweat. And I'm walking by and I'm looking at these guys and I'm thinking these are it. These are combat vets. And then when I saw Mike, it was like he had the same expression on his face, these are combat vets. But Mike was also my sister in-law's brother in-law, if that makes any sense. He was married to my sister in-law's sister, my little brother's sister in-law. And it was a sad thing.

Interviewer

How did the community react to the death of that young veteran?

Steve Cantonwine

You know, I don't know how they reacted at that time. Mike would've been in Magna, and I would have to think that there was a lot of community support in Utah. I encountered a lot of discrimination, a lot of open hostility when I came home. But I never encountered any of it in Utah. I was always welcomed with open arms in Utah. But in California, our buses would get stoned as we were leaving the bases, you know, Vietnam vets coming back.

Interviewer

Had you seen a big change in the war your second tour?

Steve Cantonwine

Yeah, I guess I would have to say yes because here I am, I'm several hundred miles further south. I'm just outside Saigon instead of up at Que Son and Da Nang. But again, everybody was peace talking. Don't antagonize 'em. They were shooting rockets at us. When I first got there the second time, they'd shoot rockets at us probably once or twice a month. By the time I left they were shooting rockets at us every Saturday. We'd get up and go to the bunkers, and then after the all clear sounded we'd go to the mess hall. It was just our normal Saturday routine.

Interviewer

What was it like when you finally left Vietnam for the last time?

Steve Cantonwine

When I finally left Vietnam for the last time, of course I felt good to be out of a combat zone, to be out of danger. I felt good. I just felt bad. I didn't even really feel bad then. If the communists had kept up their part of the bargain, it would've been great. But I happen to know a lot of Vietnamese were killed after we left simply because they had helped us.

Interviewer

Earlier you said it was better you than me, you were lucky to be alive. Did you feel some kind of connection to the Vietnamese people or what you were doing there?

Steve Cantonwine

When I worked in the village, when I went to the Combined Action Program where we stayed in the village with the villagers, we helped train the villagers, their local militia. That wasn't the better you than me. Then I felt a little bit of guilt if something happened to one of my popular forces because I didn't do something, they might've missed something in the training. Then I felt guilty. I'd feel a little bit guilty. Around Que Son, around Hue City, around Dong Ha. And you'd look at the bodies in the body bags, and you'd say, "Better you than me." And yet ten years ago I wound up in the psychiatric ward at the Denver VA Hospital for PTSD counseling. And that was a big part of it was the survivor's guilt for feeling that way. I have a lot more good memories of Vietnam than I do bad ones. It's just that the bad ones are real bad. I remember when Jeff Goss who was one of the 75 Utah Marines, he was killed getting a silver star for pulling a wounded Marine back. Greg Cuskelly who was our honor man took a machine gun round through the shoulder three days after I got there. He took a machine gun round to the shoulder, and he was with 2-3 as well, and was medevaced back to the States. A lot of the guys that were wounded, if the wounds were critical enough that they couldn't stay in country, they came back to the United States and they became MPs at Camp Pendleton. I mean, there was Mike Ernsten and Dave Hatch. Several of those guys.

Interviewer

What is a good experience in Vietnam?

Steve Cantonwine

R and R was a real good one the first time. Yeah. (laughs)

Interviewer

What did you do the first time in R and R?

Steve Cantonwine

I went to Taipei, and I'm here to tell you, they don't mess around at their airport. They've got armed Chinese soldiers all over that airport. They don't mess around with security. But I got held up at in processing. There were two other guys from 2-3, and I can't remember their names, which really bothers me at times. But they got processed before I did. And so when I got processed, we all agreed we would stay at the Kennedy Hotel. So when I got processed and I stepped out, and this guy comes up to me and says,

"Where do you want to go?" and here's about 50 Chinese people jumping up and down like crazy behind him, and I says,

"I wanna go to the Kennedy." And he turns around and yells,

"Kennedy!" And one of those guys broke loose and he comes running up and he says,

"Kennedy. Kennedy. Kennedy. Here. Here. Here." And he put me in a car. And he says,

"You're Steve?" I says,

"Yeah, I'm Steve."

"Well, so-and-so and so-and-so told me you'd be coming, Kennedy." He says,

"I asked them what they want first thing. They say they want girl. You want girl, too? I get you girl. Fine. No sweat." That was about the only thing he said. He spoke that fast, and we were all of a sudden at the Kennedy. So yeah, R and R was a good time, and it was the same no matter where you went. The girls knew that you only had a certain amount of money and you'd turn it all over to them except for maybe 50 or 60 bucks that you'd keep. And they'd make it stretch. They'd make it last. And you'd go out and go to the bars and some of the bar shows and sightseeing and stuff like that.

Interviewer

Did you go to any USO shows?

Steve Cantonwine

Not on R and R.

Interviewer

Well, when you were in-country?

Steve Cantonwine

Yeah. When I was in-country there were some USO shows. I never got to see them until I got down to my CAP unit. It used to frustrate us because you'd go to - we called it Freedom Hill - the big exchange at Da Nang Air Force Base and there were signs posted all over that says you had to quantity your ration of how many beer bottles of booze you could buy. They said,

"Except Marines. Marines are rationed two free cans of beer a day."

I never saw two free cans of beer a day. I never saw it 'til I went down to the CAP unit, and then I got to go to a couple of USO shows and it was all free beer. But the Army and the Navy and Air Force, they could go in and buy beer and bottles of booze off their ration cards, and we couldn't. We were just outside Dong Ha and Doug Muir, "Deuce." We called him "Deuce." We were in our hooch playing cards and we all decided we were hungry. So Deuce and I snuck over to the supply depot. And we didn't have to cut the wires. They'd already been cut. So we just reached in and grabbed about three or four cases of C-rations and started running, and sentry's yelling, "Halt. Halt. Halt." He can't shoot us. I mean, what were they gonna do, send us to Vietnam? So we got back and we all had the C-rations we wanted and for a change nobody was telling us what we had to have.

Interviewer

Talk about the other guys from Cyprus that you wanted to mention.

Steve Cantonwine

There was Mike Lawrence, Bill Dalton, Mike Yeates, Jim Tueller who went to Granite, got over there a year ahead of me. And I met him in the CAP units, and I remember when he died. That one was kinda hard on me.

Interviewer

Why that one?

Steve Cantonwine

They were on a four-man patrol, and by this time they'd moved me and made me the colonel's radio operator in Chu Lai. So I monitored every medevac, every patrol, every CAP unit, all of their patrols, I had 'em all tuned in. And Colonel wanted to know as soon as anything started to happen. But I don't know why. I just heard the call sign, Mike, tango, tango, three requiring a dust off. And my stomach just tightened into a knot. I just knew that it was Jim. And when they called in with the medevac number that's who it was. But they'd had two popular forces and two Marines on a patrol, and they were coming back in. And the other Marine triggered a booby trap and it blew off. It was traumatic amputation of both of both of Jim's arms and one leg. And yet, when they got him to the 327th Army Medevac Hospital in Chu Lai, he was laughing. And he died before he got home. An infection developed in the left leg. They didn't take it, and he probably would've survived if they had, but Jim was very, very active; a mountain climber. I don't know how much more I dare say on that.

Interviewer

Years later when you saw the images of us pulling out of Vietnam on TV, what did you think?

Steve Cantonwine

That's probably when I started feeling bitter. The most bitter. All I could think of was my village in Than Khe. You know, the Viet Cong had tried to execute a couple of the villagers and we had stopped 'em. I was worried about my villagers. I didn't want them left high and dry. We had a little ten-, twelve-year-old kid that had watched his whole family assassinated by the Viet Cong. And we even got him a regular weapon. He was one of the fighters as far as

we were concerned. Got him a little shortened version of the M-16 that the Green Beret used to carry around. We got that for him, and it was Butch. And he hated the VC, the North Vietnamese, just absolutely hated 'em. And I have no doubt in my mind that if he was still alive when they got there they killed him. There was no reeducation for Butch. I think one of the saddest things that I wanna talk about, the family. When I went over for the second time, KayAnne's grandfather died and they let me come home on compassion leave, which is different from emergency leave. Emergency leave, they'll fly you to the coast and then you have to fly your way home. Compassion leave, I had to pay for my ticket from Saigon. But when I got home, Lori was about 16 months, and KayAnne told her, "Go kiss Daddy goodnight."

She wouldn't have a thing to do with me. She went in the bedroom and kissed my picture. She wasn't about to kiss me goodnight. And that was hard, and it was hard going back after that to the families, the people that are back here. I'm 19 years old. I don't think about my mother and father. I write 'em. I really didn't care less what they thought. I just wrote 'em. But when it's my family - my family - it was a different story. It was hard.

Interviewer

How do you think the war changed you?

Steve Cantonwine

The CAP units. I can't stress the CAPs enough. I believe the CAPs really set the tone for most of my career later because of living with the villagers and living in their homes and learning their customs, the customs and courtesies. Whenever I traveled to a foreign country, I always tried to learn how to say "please," "thank you," and "how much" in their language, and "beer." Of course that's basically universal. But I always try to learn how to say that no matter what country I went to. And I feel I learned a lot from that. I was basically a policeman in a Vietnamese village, and I couldn't do my job. I couldn't help protect the villagers if I didn't have their trust, if I didn't have their faith. And the only way to get that was to learn their language and their customs. And I think that's one of the things that really pushed me into law enforcement when I got out of the military was to become a cop. That was going into the second tour. The second tour, because I spoke Vietnamese, I made a couple of truck runs with the company when they would send out R and R people because they'd have to go through Vietnamese checkpoints and I could communicate with the Vietnamese. There was always somebody that could speak English. I mean, it wasn't that big a deal. But the company command just seemed to feel it would be a good idea if I did this because I could speak. So I had good times that way.

Interviewer

When you got back when did you realize something was wrong?

Steve Cantonwine

It took a long time. It took a long time before I realized something was wrong. I did not believe in PTSD. To me, it was nothing but people trying to get over on the government. That's all it was. I was a Marine, I couldn't have PTSD. I was a master sergeant. I was a leader. At the height of my career, I had 200 young Marines and several

million dollars worth of TOW anti-tank missiles that I was responsible for. I couldn't have something wrong with me. The Marine Corps wouldn't let me. KayAnne had noticed it almost right away. And I will very truthfully and honestly say the only reason that KayAnne and I are still married is because she fought harder to save our marriage than I did to destroy it. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. They taught me a lot of this in Denver, but now that I've got this cancer, it's soft-tissue sarcoma. There's no two ways about it being Agent Orange related. It's not one of those well, it may be related. Soft-tissue sarcoma's one of the rarest cancers, and it is related to herbicides.

Interviewer

Did you know you were in Agent Orange?

Steve Cantonwine

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer

Describe it.

Steve Cantonwine

The government told us it wouldn't hurt us. C-130s or C-123s would fly over and spray it. Sometimes we'd pull out our ponchos. It was just like a light rain that smelled bad. Other times, we just kept walking. But like I said, at LZ Hawk there were no shower facilities. We'd go eight, nine weeks without showering. I mean, you'd stink. Your utilities would be rotting off your body. Whenever we came upon bomb craters that had filled with water from the monsoons, we'd all grab a bar of soap and jump in and push the oily stuff off to one side and then try and wipe down and get all that salt off of our utilities so it'd quit eating us raw. And that's what it was. But we weren't worried about exposure to it. We'd been told it wasn't gonna hurt us. Now we know better.

Interviewer

Is there any last thing you want to say to express to the public?

Steve Cantonwine

Just this: We're Americans. We're all Americans. You can love your country, you can support your country without loving your government. I feel my government has let me down in many ways, but my country has never let me down. And think of the families of those that are serving, especially the young wives, the young mothers. They need the help. They need somebody they can talk to. Remember 'em. And God bless America.