

Russell Elder

Salt Lake City, Utah

PH1

Navy

Combat Photographer

"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Russell Elder

Russell Ellen Elder.

Interviewer

And where were you born?

Russell Elder

In Macomb, Illinois, in 1935.

Interviewer

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

Russell Elder

Well, I grew up, I was a farm child actually for about the first seven years. My father was, I guess you'd call him a sharecropper. He worked for other farmers in the Depression. And eventually about 1944 we moved to Normal, Illinois, where he got a job that wasn't farming. And so I spent my whole childhood there in terms of grade school, high school.

Interviewer

Normal, Illinois?

Russell Elder

Normal, N-o-r-m-a-l. Named because that's what the university was. There was nothing normal about Normal.

Interviewer

Which university?

Russell Elder

Illinois State Normal University.

Interviewer

Say why was there nothing normal in Normal?

Russell Elder

There was nothing normal about Normal because Normal was ruled by the Fell family who brought the university in. And for the longest time there were a whole bunch of restrictions on what people could do, what businesses there

could be. They held a pretty tight hand on the place for a long time.

Interviewer

Tell us about high school and doing photography.

Russell Elder

Well, I started out I got tapped for the projectionist club by the science teacher. So what we did as a club, we went around to all the classrooms and we would show the motion pictures for the classrooms. We got a lotta sleep, especially historical movies.

And from that, he came to two of us and said, "Would you two guys like to be the school photographer?" He said, "You treat the equipment well and you kinda know what you're doing with that."

So we said, "Sure." It sounded like a new exciting thing. Meet a lotta girls as a photographer. And so we became the school photographer; covered all the football games, basketball games, most of the school events. And for the yearbook, we even went out, and shot ads at local stores and stuff to put in the yearbook. And we learned to process and enlarge and crop and all the stuff you do as a photographer.

Interviewer

What year did you graduate?

Russell Elder

1954.

Interviewer

When did you decide you wanted to be a photographer?

Russell Elder

Well, I decided at that time I was gonna go in the Navy.

Interviewer

Why?

Russell Elder

Why? Partly escape from a father who seemed to know every cop in town and knew everything I did, good, bad or indifferent. And so that was not something I wanted to stick around with. Secondly, I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. So I went ahead and joined the Navy figuring that if nothing else, It'd be four years of something I hadn't done before. And they asked me what I wanted to be. I said well, a photographer 'cause I liked being a photographer.

And they said, "Tsk, tsk, tsk, I don't know. An awful lot of people wanna be a photographer."

I said, "Yeah, but have they done it for four years already?"

So eventually they sent me to aviation preparatory school, and so that made me eligible to be a photographer because it's an aviation rating. And the first thing they did was give me orders to Japan. That broke my heart having to go to Japan.

Interviewer

What year did you get there?

Russell Elder

I got to Japan in I think it was February of '55.

Interviewer

So this is 11 years before you go to Vietnam.

Russell Elder

Yeah.

Interviewer

When did you first hear of Vietnam?

Russell Elder

Well, I heard of Vietnam in about '62 when they sent my brother over there. Up until then, it was just a news item on the evening broadcast, you know. I had paid no attention to it really. My brother put a year over there in Qui Nhon, which was kind of a backwater place. It was more up in III Corps, which is kinda halfway up the coast.

Interviewer

Was he in the Navy?

Russell Elder

No. He was Army. He got drafted.

Interviewer

But there was not a lot of shooting going on at that time.

Russell Elder

Yeah, actually there was. There was. You just didn't hear as much about it. It hadn't been converted to President Johnson's war yet. And he was EOD, which gave me a proclivity in later years for EOD that I covered them a great deal. EOD is Explosive Ordnance Disposal. They go out and make things go boom that did not go boom the first time.

Interviewer

So they're the ones who dispose of booby traps and unexploded bombs?

Russell Elder

...bombs, rockets, ejection seats that don't work and just anything that is explosive.

Interviewer

Did he tell you anything was going on?

Russell Elder

Some, you know, because he ran into a few things that bothered him that he wrote about. In fact, he wrote a story when he got back. He was gonna write a book, but it turned out to be more of a short story that he wanted to get published called, "Tiger Tiger." And, well, the reason was he was out in the jungle. He had to go out to this one aircraft that crashed in the jungle. Still had bombs on it. And they had to go out and get rid of 'em. And they were out there. He had somebody with him. And all they carried was a .45, which is like a peashooter in a machine gun contest. And they were out there and they heard something in the jungle, and it was going all around them. And they figured later it was a tiger. Found paw prints in the dirt.

Interviewer

What bothered your brother?

Russell Elder

What bothered him? Mostly what he considered to be the futility of it. He didn't see that we were getting anywhere. He didn't see that we were accomplishing anything that was worthwhile, and I sort of had to agree with him. I mean, when they were there, they didn't even have a refrigerator until they managed to con one out of a supply sergeant. So they were living in a hooch, which is a Vietnam version of a tent-covered house. You had a wooden floor and a tent-side top. And they had nothing to go with. If they could steal food they were lucky.

Interviewer

So you had this inside information early on about Vietnam. Tell us about when you heard you were going to Vietnam, and did you want to?

Russell Elder

Well, I was on my way to Vietnam once before I went, and I had applied to Syracuse University for a Navy program in photojournalism, which guaranteed me a MOS, which was like a job code of photojournalism. So I went out to San Diego for training to go to Vietnam as a combat photographer, actually.

And while I was there, they stopped my orders and held me there for two months; wouldn't ship me back home because of some stupid thing. It's all bureaucracy. And eventually I went back and went to Syracuse, and I spent a year in Syracuse University going through photojournalism programs and sociology programs. Everything you could think of that would be in a general education factor, along with the specialty.

And in fact all our courses were taught by department heads. You've got people in there 14 to 16 years in the Navy, and you're not gonna send 'em kids. It'd be slaughter. They sent us people we had to respect. So we knew when we graduated from that program there was only one place any of us were gonna go; I mean, we knew that. But we

wanted the program so we went. And when we got done, we all got ordered to things like Combat Camera Group Pacific, which is where I went, which meant you were gonna spend tours in Vietnam. And my job was to document, write about and photograph what we were doing in Vietnam as the Navy. That was my job with Combat Camera Group.

Interviewer

So when, where and how did you arrive?

Russell Elder

With a 14-hour flight from Travis Air Force Base to Tan Son Nhut, which was in Saigon. Tan Son Nhut Air Base. And of course every time you got there, why the crew that was already there, the main effort was to try and scare the hell out of ya. So they came roaring up in their van with M-16s and submachine guns sticking out of every crevice. "Get in, get in, hurry, hurry." We're all going, "Oh, God," you know. So that was our introduction to Vietnam. And from that point on, it became, as somebody once put it, days of abject boredom punctuated by seconds of stark terror.

Interviewer

Tell us about the first time you came under fire.

Russell Elder

Oh, that was with the Seabee patrols, PBRs. And PBR is Patrol Boat, River. And generally, they got a couple of 50 calibers. Sometimes they've just got some M-60s, which was kind of a light machine gun that you could hand hold, and they used 'em a lot in the door gunners in the Hueys, the gunships. So we went down to Binh Thuy, which was down in the Delta.

Interviewer

What's the Delta?

Russell Elder

Saigon River runs down to the Delta. The Delta just goes everywhere, okay. And it was all jungle. It hung over the gunnels of your boat. You could cruise down these little channels.

Interviewer

And you're assigned to a boat?

Russell Elder

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

Tell us about the crew, and tell us about your experiences with them.

Russell Elder

Well, the crew, they were just good people. They were very friendly, accepting, but in my estimation they were nuts.

Interviewer

Tell us what year this is.

Russell Elder

This would've been '67 before Christmas. The exact time I couldn't even begin to pinpoint for you. It all runs together after 40 years, you know. But we were out there, and as I said, I thought they were crazy. And you asked why. They were crazy. As I told one guy on the back of the boat, I says, "You see this flag sitting up here in the tree." Okay. Viet Cong flag and there's a sign under it. "It says, 'you Americans are chicken to come up here and take down this flag.' And you idiots go through these little channels and these palm fronds hanging over the edge of the boat, and you go up there, and you take the stupid sign and flag down. That's nuts. You know they're waiting sometimes."

And he looked at me and he says, "I've got an M-60 in my hand. What've you got?" He says, "You've got two Nikons. I'm crazy?" I said, "My friend, if I need that M-60, I figure there will be one available." And he shut up. He didn't say any more. And we were running PSYOPs, which is Psychological Operations, which means we go out through all these little channels.

Interviewer

What did you call the Psychological Operations?

Russell Elder

PSYOPS. And we were going through these little channels with the palm fronds hanging over the edge of the boat. And he's playing his records of Vietnamese yelling, "Chieu Hoi, come in. We treat you very nice. We give you food," beads, whatever, you know.

Interviewer

So these were recordings on loudspeakers?

Russell Elder

Recordings. We'd play 'em on loudspeaker. We're very, very inconspicuous.

Interviewer

Did this make you feel vulnerable and like you were going to be a target?

Russell Elder

Yes. I didn't think there was any doubt we were a target. We're running through six feet of water, which these boats can do. They can run through three. They're a jet boat. They have water jets in 'em, which I'll deal with in a minute anyway.

But anyway, we're down there and yeah, we felt vulnerable. So we got through all that, and we got done with it and we get a call on the radio. They wanted us to go back out into the river. They thought they had a floating bomb. One

of the things that the Viet Cong did was they'd take Styrofoam from the things that came into the PX, and they'd pack bombs in 'em, and float 'em down the river and explode 'em when they thought they'd do the most damage. And so they wanted us to go out and check out this thing to see if it was a bomb. Well, there's a thrill for you that makes your day.

So we went out and we're in the river, and we come up on this thing, and we skirt it about 50 yards or so to begin with, and doesn't look like it's anything but just a half a piece of Styrofoam. Doesn't look like there's anything in it. So the guy takes a boat hook and nothing, you know. Then all at once, the boat captain for some reason reaches over and two-blocks the throttle. Two-block, for those of you who are civilian oriented, means he jammed that thing all the way forward.

And the whole back end of the boat dropped. And about that time, something came through the muffler. And it was an RPG, rocket propelled grenade. And it exploded in the muffler, which is the only thing that saved any of us. So it just sprayed all of us with little tiny pieces, okay. And machine gun gunners start shooting. And I'm standing at the door to go down, and this ensign takes me with him. He was going through that door no matter who was in his way. And so I'm lying underneath him saying, "What are you doing here? It's a fiberglass boat. It don't stop bullets." So I got up, got upstairs and started shooting pictures, which is what I was supposed to do. And I discovered something that's been an oddity to me all this time, and that is that once I got the camera up, okay, and I'm taking pictures, it's happening out there, not here. I'm not there. I'm removed.

Interviewer

Tell us about the photos.

Russell Elder

Well, I got pictures of them shooting back, and pictures of the boat getting pumped full of water, 'cause that's what happened. It ruptured something down there, and we were taking on water. So everybody thought we were gonna sink. Not a pleasant idea in hostile territory. So anyway, one of the guys is down there in the back of the boat, and I got pictures of him down there trying to find out what was going on. They had ruptured one of the main water lines to one of the jet water streams. And it was pumping water into the boat.

So they got that crimped off, and they decided they were gonna have to beach the boat. There's no way they could run all the way back to the base without sinking us. So in order to raise the back end of the boat out, we all, me included, started moving boxes of ammunition up to the forward end of the boat. So we moved everything up there. Somewhere in the process, I got burned on the arm up in here. Don't know where, don't know when. And so we got that done and we beached the boat. And it's a funny thing. War is hell, as they've said.

And my brother had told me once that I was wrong when I told him I could never shoot a woman or a child. He says, "You'll find that out." So I'm standing on the forward part of this boat while they beach, and I've got my .45, which is the only thing we carried, and I jacked around in that chamber, and I swear to God, if it'd crawled out of those bushes in diapers I'd have shot it. That's a revelation.

Interviewer

What happened the rest of the day?

Russell Elder

Well, the rest of the day nothing happened. That was the point. Where in the hell anybody was, we don't know. We have no idea. Nobody ever showed up. But another boat came in, took us in tow and pulled us back into port.

Interviewer

It was your first day in combat?

Russell Elder

Yeah. Yeah. And we went back to the base and the corpsman took me in, and he dressed it and bandaged my burn. And so we went in, and we had a cold beer. And the guys on the boat bought me a beer 'cause it was my first firefight. And the corpsman came in and he says, "So how does it feel to have your first Purple Heart?" I said, "You've gotta be kidding." He says, "The ensign scratched his finger and he's getting one." I said, "I'll take it." That's two points on reading exams. That was two more points I could get next time I went up for rank.

Interviewer

Did that day change you?

Russell Elder

Yeah. Yeah, it did. That and a number of other things that went on all through that first bunch of trips over there with Combat Camera Group. We'd spend like six weeks in country, and go back to Japan and civilization. Then come back six weeks in country, and then go home. So yeah, that changed me some. I don't know what it made me. It made me more sober about the whole thing 'cause it was very close to home at that point. It made me feel things I didn't think I could feel.

Interviewer

What kind of things?

Russell Elder

Well, the fact that I would shoot anything that moved, if it moved. That was alien to me. It may be the enemy, but women, children, I was brought up those were sacrosanct. You didn't beat women or shoot them. You didn't beat children or shoot them. It didn't go.

Interviewer

What's the difference between looking through a gun sight and a camera lens?

Russell Elder

A camera lens you are recording history. A gun sight you are in it. Big difference.

Interviewer

It's not out there.

Russell Elder

No. You're in it.

Interviewer

What else changed you?

Russell Elder

Like, during Tet. We were actually out on the Coral Sea during Tet. We went out there to document the last flights of the AD Sky War, which was the prop plane. We were gonna turn all of those over to the South Vietnamese, and no longer use 'em. Of course, the fact that they were the best air-ground support vehicle we had in the air made no difference to anybody. It was crazy. Then while we were out there they had Tet, and we couldn't get in, nobody could get out. Everything was frozen.

When I did get back, some of the guys that were in our unit had gone out, and shot pictures of piles of Viet Cong bodies lying around. I said, "Why? Why do you wanna do that?" I preferred shooting the people that were in the war, the reason for the war, the collateral damage of the war. That's what I liked to do because that's where it was all about. It wasn't about the bodies it was about the people.

As I said in a show I did later, it was the most advanced technological country in the world came into one of the most backward countries of the world, and in the name of saving it, destroyed it. And that's what we did. So that's part of the things that just totally changed me. I went in the first time like John Wayne. Later, when I was in Da Nang, I very much decided that what we were doing was totally stupid and useless.

Interviewer

Is there any one incident that changed you?

Russell Elder

Well, not any one. None of it's ever any one, I don't think. You have to have sort of a plethora of events to eventually change you. But the first thing I did in Da Nang, when they sent me to Da Nang, I was with the Naval Support Activity, NSA.

And the first day I walked in, this lieutenant commander, public affairs officer says, "Okay, Petty Officer Elder, what do you see as your job over here?" And you could see that he was waiting for me to tell him, "I'm gonna run the photo lab," because that's what the guy before me had done. I said, "Well, Commander," I said, "I think the more important question is what I see as your job." "What do you mean?" I said, "I think your job is to get that photo lab

off my butt, and let me get in the field." And he was overjoyed. "You mean you wanna go out and do things?" I said, "Yes, that's what I'm here for."

I spent the next two months going to every detachment around I Corps photographing what was going on there, what the guys were doing, what they were building, what they were moving, all that kinda thing. And in that process I met a lotta guys. And there were some things that I cannot say even on public TV. But this one guy I thought was absolutely gorgeous. He was driving a forklift, and he had this helmet on with the cloth cover. And on the cover it says, "Mother, get me the...outta here."

Interviewer

Tell us about that again. And tell us what the attitude of the soldiers was.

Russell Elder

That was pretty much their attitude. Yeah. While I was out shooting the vets, everywhere I went it was the same thing. They're all wondering why they're there, what they're doing there, and nobody's got an answer for 'em except the officers would say, "Because we're ordered here." That seemed to be the main answer we always got. But this one guy on the forklift summed it all up.

Interviewer

Tell us about the helmet.

Russell Elder

He had the helmet with the cloth cover. And on the cloth cover in felt tip he'd written, "Mother, get me the...outta here." I took a picture and it never made it through the sensors. They didn't want anybody to see that. But almost everybody out there wondered what they were doing there. The only way you could get around up in I Corps was to run the rivers.

You had the Qua Viet River that ran across just underneath the DMZ. And so everything moved up that river, and they moved by, like, landing craft, basically, Skilacks, which were a big modern landing craft and held more gear. But everything, C-rations, equipment, everything ran by these boats. And as we'd go down the river, there would be children running along the river, and the guys would bust open a case of C-rations and throw things to 'em, which was kind of interesting. They wouldn't eat it, but they'd feed it to the kids. C-rations weren't all that bad. I'd rather have C-rations than LRPs in most cases. And LRPs, that's the Long Range Patrol rations.

Interviewer

What makes them so awful?

Russell Elder

They're all freeze dried. You mean the LRPs? They're freeze dried. And if you haven't got the capacity at this moment to boil water to pour in the package to kneed it around and melt it, you're eating powder. It's very crunchy

but not very tasty.

Interviewer

Did you see any SEALs, and what'd you think of them?

Russell Elder

Well, in fact, one of the people who went through Syracuse was a SEAL. He was a SEAL. His name was...I can't remember now. And I got tied up in Da Nang with both EOD, I did several stories on EOD, and they saved my life a couple times, because you don't walk around in some places without your guide.

And then I had another thing, which was a detachment of SEALs who were there training Vietnamese to be SEALs. And when I got there to the photo lab, I had a gentleman, who was my second-in-command when I got there, who was on flight pay. And I said, "Okay, we're splitting. You'll take half one month, I'll take the next 'cause I'm saving up for cameras." And so that's what we did.

And he says, "Well, then let me tell you what we do with flight pay." And I thought okay. I'd already been with the Seawolves, we flew around, and shooting holes in jungles and things like that, and boats and whatever. That was down at the Delta. And he says, "What's gonna happen one of these days, this guy's gonna come through the door and he's gonna say, 'We're going now.' So you don't ask questions. You just pick up your Nikon with your hundred-millimeter lens, you get on that helicopter and you go. And you shoot where they tell you to shoot." Okay. So that's what I did. For several months I did that.

Interviewer

What were some of the times that that happened?

Russell Elder

It was periodic. You never knew.

Interviewer

Tell us about one of them.

Russell Elder

This one time in particular they came in, and we went out. And we always had these little places that we'd land and check and make sure everyone was all right. Little enclaves that were out there like little detachments. And everything was all right.

But this one time we went up, and we're flying along, and we really caught it. I mean, this is an old UH-34, which is like shooting at a barrage balloon from the bottom. That's where you learn to sit on your flak jacket. And 19 holes in that helicopter when we landed, and we never saw anybody.

And so I went in and I processed the film, and this lieutenant commander we called Jose came back. And I said, "Okay, Jose. Look, if I'm getting shot at for a reason I don't mind. But I'd like to know the reason. Is this really, really beneficial?" And he took one of those pictures and he said, "This is a bunker, this is a bunker, and this is a bunker, and we don't wanna fall into 'em in the middle of the night. So what you're doing is you're showing us where they are." So I said, "Okay. That's good. That's all I needed to know." And we kept flying. But we always came back with a hole or two in the helicopter, but 19 was a little much.

Interviewer

Now, when you took photos of men who'd really seen combat, what'd you see?

Russell Elder

It depended a lot. Most of the time, you had your support group there with you. You know, it was like me. When I came back, and got outta the hospital, I had a support group, which was my old unit. People without support groups had the hard times. People with the support group tend to roll with it, and learn from it and grow out of it mostly. And they developed a weird sense of humor, in case you hadn't noticed.

But we had songs and sings and things in Vietnam that you wouldn't have under any other condition. You had to have been under fire or something to even begin to understand what was being said. I'd send my second-in-command out on a job, right, and I'd say, "Here, sign this paper." "What's that for?" I said, "It wills your cameras to me just in case you don't make it." Well, we thought these were funny. They may not be funny now, but they were funny then, and they had to be because you're sending someone you work with daily out on a job he may not come out from.

Interviewer

When you took photos of men who'd been in combat, what did you see in them?

Russell Elder

Some were haunted. You could see it in their eyes. You could see it in their face. They were haggard, they were haunted. The only thing they really wanted was to get the hell outta there. And I second that motion. I wanted outta there, too. Not the way I got outta there, but I wanted outta there. Okay.

Interviewer

But you're in a fascinating position because you're there to look in faces, and you're there to capture things with a lens.

Russell Elder

But most of it doesn't show. Remove them, get them in another location away from the support group, away from what's going on, away from survival and then it changes. Then they withdraw. Then they become angry. They become volatile. The old ticking time bomb thing, you heard that for years out of Vietnam. Post-Combat Stress Syndrome. You heard that a lot. And it was there for a lotta people. But the thing that got to me I think worst of all

was when I was finally out of it, and then teaching in the university up by Chicago. They kept, year after year, interviewing the same nine people with the same problems, no advancement in their attitudes at all. They still couldn't cope with life. It was like they didn't want to cope with life. And those were the ones that made me mad.

90 percent of the guys that got out of Vietnam, combat and all, went home, got a life and lived it, my brother included. Took him six years to get through college 'cause he'd go, and he'd stay drunk for six months and then he'd go back. Yeah, but he did it. Unlike some of these other people who would rather stand in front of the camera, and complain about how little anybody cared about what happened to them. I didn't see a lot of that.

What I paid attention to more than that were the people around the war; the kids that manned the shops because there probably was no father. He was impressed into the Vietnamese Army. All the women that were out in the squares selling anything they could lay their hands on, trying to make a living because there was no man in the family because he was out in the Army. Those were the people that impressed me most. Our guys survived most of it. They were equipped to survive it. These people were equipped to just exist.

Interviewer

So you were attracted to the civilians?

Russell Elder

They were the ones hurt most.

Interviewer

Tell us about your experiences with the civilians.

Russell Elder

Well, the civilians, you never knew what they were doing. You never knew if they were friends. You never knew if they were foe. You just didn't. There were no lines. There were no points where you could say, "Beyond this is them, this part's us." There wasn't any solid line anywhere. And that existed with the civilians, too.

I would imagine that any number of the civilians, including the maids that we had in our villa there when I was there with the Combat Camera Group in Saigon, who knows who they were with. You never knew. That was the thing that was really, really keeping you on your toes and keeping you scared. Who were they? What were they doing? Who were they really with? And most of 'em didn't care.

I think it was 1967, "LIFE" did a little walkthrough in the rice paddies, and they'd say, "Oh, you rice farmer. Who are those big green guys walking across the Delta down there?" And they'd go, "Oh, it's the French. They're still fighting the Vietnam." They didn't have any idea what was going on. Didn't even care. All they wanted was, "Don't break my rice bowl. Break my rice bowl I don't eat. Burn my hooch I don't have a place to sleep." And what I saw out there,

the biggest problem we had was media.

Interviewer

How was that?

Russell Elder

Oh, I'll get some denials out of this. If you remember, there was a picture that became very famous of this guy with a Zippo lighter lighting the roof of a hooch. He did that at the request of a guy with a camera who wanted footage for that night's news.

We had one outside of Da Nang that came back from an all-day patrol and nothing had happened. So the guy said, "Okay, look. Lie down in the weeds here, and let's fire off a few rounds over there into the jungle so I got something to put on the news tonight." They got into a firefight with another patrol that was in the woods. Our patrol.

Interviewer

So would you run into American news media in your job?

Russell Elder

Oh, yeah. We used to eat at the press club in Da Nang. We'd go out for lunch at the press club.

Interviewer

Tell us about these journalists.

Russell Elder

Journalists are what journalists are. They are there for one purpose. That's to get something on the news tonight. And whatever they gotta do to do it, they'll do it. It don't have to be real. It's just gotta look real. And I don't know. Maybe I'm being too hard on 'em, but there were too many incidents like that that I knew of.

On the other hand, there's people like Larry. He was a photojournalist for "LIFE" Magazine. Larry Burrows. Larry Burrows went out over Laos in a helicopter, and never came back. I think that you would have to figure was a legitimate firefight if he got to shoot any of it. But so many others weren't.

One of my mates in Combat Camera Group was out on a boat. There were two or three press people with him. And he was out there, and he said the guy that was with him, one of his guides or something, they got into a firefight, and he reached up to push him down and he pushed him down and came back and he had half his head in his hand. So you can't say they're all that way, but there's a good number of them that fomented things that killed other people under friendly fire.

Interviewer

Do you feel like the images changed the war?

Russell Elder

Hell, we didn't understand what was going on. You had all the photojournalists out there, and you had all the motion picture people out there, and all the press people out there to cover the news, and hopefully some of it would be good because that's what Johnson needed. President Johnson needed some good news, not all the bad news, and he very seldom got it.

Interviewer

What were your feelings about the civilian press? Did you think they did a good job?

Russell Elder

Probably most of 'em, yeah. But there's always that one or two that just had to get film for the news, and it didn't matter who they hurt doing it. If they didn't get film, they didn't get money. I think a lot of the press was paid on a mercenary basis just as much as mercenaries in an army. And I don't think that makes good press, and I don't think it makes for good journalism.

Interviewer

Talk about attrition and the body counts that were sent back.

Russell Elder

Bodies were bodies. Like in Tet, when the Viet Cong and probably North Vietnamese, too, tried to invade Tan Son Nhut Airport, they just took everybody, stacked 'em all up, counted 'em and said they were all attackers. I don't think probably all of them were. There's not much doubt in my mind a lot of civilians were counted as casualties.

Interviewer

Did you see that in your own personal experience?

Russell Elder

No, because I didn't do it. I would not photograph bodies.

Interviewer

Can you say that again?

Russell Elder

I would not photograph bodies. Bodies are dead. I'm interested in the living. I don't know. As I said, I went over there as John Wayne the first time, and came back and said, "What the hell are we doing?"

Interviewer

Tell us about the USO show.

Russell Elder

It is a phenomenon. And having been somewhat attached to show business during my life, I must admit that it is a show of shows. Bob Hope flew in on a COD, which is a small plane that usually carries mail and small numbers of people, you know, probably 12, 20 people most. And so he flew in, and was arrested going it. You stop in ten seconds. And they got off the plane, and we had Les Brown and Raquel Welch. They had Miss Universe. I don't

remember her name, unfortunately. I looked it up not too long ago. Barbara McNair. Gorgeous lady. Great voice but became a drug addict within years after. But yeah, so we all went up to the admiral's cabin. Of course, the admiral had the ability to dine and wine them properly.

Interviewer

So you were part of the entourage then.

Russell Elder

No, no. I was on deck. Was on the ship. But I'd insinuate myself any chance I got. If I could get an open door and go, I'd go. In fact, I went up there and the Marine guard started to stop me. And I said, "Combat Camera Group. I'm covering this." "Oh, okay. Good."

Interviewer

Did you get pictures?

Russell Elder

I got some. But I went in, and I was gonna shoot pictures of Raquel Welch. And I walked up and I said, "Ms. Welch, do you mind?" Oh, well, I've got pictures. The ones I gave you that are on the thumb drive of the show. And I walked up to her and I said, "Ms. Welch, do you mind if I shoot a few pictures of you around the admiral's cabin?" "No, not if you must." I said, "No, I don't must." And I turned around and left.

They forget who pays their bills, and that don't impress me. Bob Hope, meanwhile, was over there holding court. That man on his own is the corniest man you have ever listened to. "Yeah, I guess we had to land here. The propeller ran out of rubber band." Just everything he had was like very dated. It's a good thing he had writers. That's all I could tell you. Without writers he'd never have made it. But very personable. I mean, you could love the man just listening and watching him. In fact, the whole crew was very nice with one exception, and that was Raquel.

Interviewer

Did you cover the show?

Russell Elder

Oh, yeah. I covered the show.

Interviewer

You shot the audience and they loved him.

Russell Elder

Oh, you get those pictures I gave you, you've got 'em hanging off of everything on the ship. You've got 'em hanging off the wash down system. They got, like, a sprinkler system that's attached to the island, and all that sprays down the deck if you get gas on it or something. They're hanging on that. They're hanging off the balconies. Actually, they're not balconies.

But you've got these kids just hanging off of everything. You've got officers with their legs hanging over the edge looking down, and every space on the island where you could sit or stand is covered. And huge audience out in front, too. And she's dancing with two of the crewmen. Two common old white hats are up there dancing with Raquel Welch, and one of 'em's going, "Oh," you know. The expression on his face. And the crowd's loving it because she's got this knit dress, very loose knit blue and white thing, dress you'd call it, I guess, that looks like it's see through. It's not, but it looks like it. So they're all hoping to see through. And bright red panties.

Interviewer

Talk about her dress.

Russell Elder

It's short. It's thigh high, and bright red panties. And those bright red panties you could see from anywhere when she turned in any direction. I thought that was well-calculated for a group of sailors that haven't seen a woman in six months. It was a great show. A great show. Everybody loved it.

I was forced to sit down by my brother and watch "Apocalypse Now," which I hated with all my body. But there were some things I think they had right. The guys on the PBR cruising down the river smoking their joints. We had one guy on a PBR that had a monkey. And I shot a picture of him with his monkey sitting on his shoulders, and that was one of my pictures of what the war really meant, you know, a monkey on your back. Not to mention the monkey's on their backs because they could get dope over there.

Interviewer

Did you see that was a problem?

Russell Elder

I don't know that marijuana's ever been a problem. We don't wanna get into that.

Interviewer

But you said they had a monkey on their back.

Russell Elder

Yeah, they did. The war was a monkey on their back. Some of these guys were addicted to the war. Not just the dope, the war. They were all playing John Wayne out there. And some good kids. I hope they all got back. I don't know. I hope they do. Our photojournalists, I don't think we ever lost one. We had a couple of us wounded, but never lost one.

Interviewer

Were you wounded?

Russell Elder

I got burned the first time and shot the second time.

Interviewer

Tell us about when you were shot.

Russell Elder

I lost two inches of extension. I'd go home, and my coffee cup was where it normally was, but I couldn't find it. And every once in a while, Styrofoam cups, I'd just let go. Still does sometimes. We got a new public affairs officer in Da Nang who had yet to make his name for himself. You know how that is.

And he called me in one day, and he says, "I want you to go on this Swift Boat down in the Cua Dai River." I said, "Why?" "Well, I think there's a story there that you need to look at." I said, "I don't think there's a story on a story on a Swift Boat in the river. Swift Boats aren't even supposed to be in the river. They're supposed to be in coastal waters. What are they doing down there?" "Well, I don't know, but I think you need to go cover it." So anyway, I didn't have much choice at that point.

But I was going on R and R, so I went on R and R to Hawaii with my wife before I took the job. When I got back, he was very insistent, so out we went. And we're sitting here on a Swift Boat, and they've beached it, basically. And they're on the fantail of this boat, firing mortars at night. I know not at what. They know not at what. They just wanted to see if it worked. Now, how do you photograph and document firing mortars at night? You don't. It's that simple. And there's nobody that wants to tell me why they're out there and what they're doing. So I've got nothing to write.

So up comes the sun, bright and early. Beautiful Vietnamese morning. And as we pull away from the shore, so to speak, you hear "pop," "pop," "pop," "pop," "pop." And I turned around and the gunner on top of the deckhouse is swinging that .50 around. So I decided, "I'm gonna get some shots of him firing. At least I'll get something out of this." And about the time I reach for my camera, my arm went up like that, just like getting hit with a sledgehammer. And when it came down again, it was in two pieces.

And they laid me out in the deckhouse. The lieutenant was from EOD. Again, EOD was there. EOD was always with me somewhere. And I'd done about three or four stories on them and I could cook, so I could do no harm. And so he laid me down on the deck, and I look over there and this thing is, like, swung up here. And I said, "Hey, Lieutenant Ellis, you think it's broke?" And he looked at me. He said, "Yeah, I think so." I said, "You think there's a chance?" I was being funny, and he thought I was serious. I mean, what else do you do? You're sitting there. You better be funny. You can't get serious about it.

And so they called in a medical helicopter and headed for the nearest place they could get one in. And one of the guys gave me a morphine shot. He gave me the morphine shot down here. And then they're talking. "Well, let's see.

Do you think it's gonna get up to the upper part? It's kinda messed up in there." So they gave me another one up here. By the time that helicopter got there and I got on that helicopter, I did not care if the sun rose or set or it was rain or shine. I could've cared nothing less. It just didn't matter. Didn't matter. And I ended up in an Army field hospital, heaven help me. I was "M.A.S.H." all over again.

Interviewer

What happened at the hospital?

Russell Elder

Well, I got in there and the nurse comes over. And evidently they were injecting me with Demerol. Wonderful stuff. Wonderful stuff. It'll kill the pain, if anything. And she says, "We can't keep giving you this stuff, you know." I said, "Why? Are you short of it?" She says, "No, you'll just get addicted." I said, "Okay."

And about that time, my second-in-command came in and looked at me and says, "This is the sneakiest way to get outta here before me." I said, "I'd planned it this way. I told you." 'Cause we'd been having an ongoing argument. He got there in August. I got there in October. And we'd had this ongoing argument of who was gonna get out of country first. And we didn't care, just so we got outta country. That was the whole thing. But the only one that never came to see me was the lieutenant commander who sent me out there. Other people came to see me, but not him.

Interviewer

Why?

Russell Elder

I think he felt guilty. There was nothing there. There was no story there. There was nothing I could photograph there because it was night. And I'm not gonna shoot flash pictures in the middle of Viet Cong territory. Really bright. Then I could apply to become a civilian journalist.

Interviewer

One of the nurses talked about how they really had to harden themselves in the beginning because they saw so much carnage.

Russell Elder

Yeah. I understand that a little bit from my stint in the hospital.

Interviewer

And had you photographed the hospitals?

Russell Elder

No. By that time, I only had one hand I could photograph with, and it doesn't work very well when you're right-handed.

Interviewer

How about before on assignment?

Russell Elder

Yeah. Oh, yeah. No. I'd covered Da Nang Hospital off and on. In fact, I was there when they brought Chesty Puller's son in. You know who Chesty Puller was? He was the ultimate general of Marines. They brought his son in, and his son was an absolute mess. He had really been messed up. And they wouldn't let me in. They wouldn't let me shoot him. They wouldn't let me get anywhere near him.

Interviewer

Tell us about your experience in the hospital. Who took care of you?

Russell Elder

Who took of me was nurses at that point. And they were a little hard, and I think they had to be. It's like the one that said, "We can't keep giving you this stuff, you know." And that's about the tone she said it in. Well, okay. I can understand that because I did. I got addicted to that. I actually did. But while we were there, they got me all ready and they put me on a C-41. And I didn't have much conversation with the nurse, except when she said things like that.

Interviewer

What were you thinking?

Russell Elder

I was thinking, I'm getting the hell outta here is what I was thinking because they already told me, they said, "This is your ticket home."

Interviewer

And this made you feel how?

Russell Elder

So what's holding us up? So they packed me up on a C-41 and took me to Japan. I got to Japan. I was in a stretcher all the way. They got stretcher at base. And they took me off the plane and put me on this gurney. This is not supposed to happen. This corpsman looks down at me and says, "You're safe now. You're home." And I broke like a damn side of New Orleans. It just all came out. Every bit of it. All the tension. All the everything. I probably didn't stop shedding tears for fifteen minutes. 'Cause you just go whew. That was a very happy time knowing that I wasn't there anymore.

And then when I got into the hospital in Yokosuka, some of the corpsmen there were really, really - especially the young ones - very cold, very hard. "Shut up. You're just pretending. You're not really hurt that much." What happened was all the nerves, all the nerves, grew to pain nerves, so everything that happened on that arm hurt. Flies landing, whatever, it hurt.

And so for the longest time, they still had me on Demerol for another, probably a week. And by the time they weaned me off of Demerol, I mean, I was hooked. And I have great sympathy for people who quit anything cold

turkey. It's gotta be tough. And this commander comes in and he says, "Here's what I want you to take for your pain." And he gets out this bottle from in back of the nurse's station, pours a shot and he says, "Have one of these every four hours." He says, "I know you're Mormon." I said, "Doc, I haven't been Mormon all my life. I know what this is, and you've got good stuff."

And so then they brought in somebody else who said to me, "We're gonna try an experiment if you wanna do it. He said, "We'll give you a nerve block." I said, "Will it stop the pain?" He says, "We hope it will." I said, "Go for it." They put me on the table and they put a needle right here and proceeded, as far as I could tell, to nail me to the table. And they hit the nerve ganglia that runs down the spin and it all went away. It all went away. And then he says, "Now, when this shot wears off it's gonna be worse than it was before." Thank you. Oh, thank you very much. I'm glad you forewarned me. He said, "Believe it or not, you built up tolerance, but your tolerance is gone once that shot hits." And it was. It was. But they eventually took me in and did a sympathectomy, which means they severed the sympathetic nerve system.

Interviewer

What does that mean?

Russell Elder

Well, it means that the perspiration on my right side is very, very small. I don't lose heat easily on the right side 'cause the blood all runs in one speed. I still have problems here with that radial nerve running down that thumb and finger. I can't tell you the difference between a screw and a stove bolt if I go that way. I can't do it.

Interviewer

You were married?

Russell Elder

Yeah.

Interviewer

You get to see your wife.

Russell Elder

Not 'til I got to San Diego. I was shot in July and I was in San Diego by August or September. And then she could come to the hospital and pick me up and I went home. And I had to come back a couple days later to get the cast off and go through therapy 'cause my fingers were like that and my arm was like that. The first thing she did was go, "Ahh." And then she straightened every finger. It's a good thing it was a woman therapist.

Interviewer

What was it like when she saw you for the first time?

Russell Elder

Very relieved. She was very relieved. My daughter, too. My oldest daughter was 11 or 12. 11, probably. And there

were tears, you know.

Interviewer

You had children.

Russell Elder

Hell, I cried.

Interviewer

How many children did you have?

Russell Elder

At that point, three. I had a son that we lost two years later, and a daughter who had some handicaps that was 39 when she finally died. She had terrible, terrible immune deficiency and diabetes and other things. And now I've got it theoretically because of Agent Orange.

Interviewer

Do you think it was Agent Orange?

Russell Elder

Well, they think it's Agent Orange. They won't say so.

Interviewer

Were you around a lot of Agent Orange? Did you see it?

Russell Elder

Agent Orange was used in Vietnam anywhere there was jungle from 1966 on into the '70s. So if you were anywhere near the jungle you were exposed to Agent Orange.

Interviewer

What'd it smell like?

Russell Elder

You don't smell it. It don't smell. It just coats everything. So all those times we were running that boat through all that foliage along the river, we were probably throwing it up in the air, you know, whatever. But as long as you were there during those times, they considered that you were exposed to Agent Orange. And my wife at the time that I lost in '05, when she found out that they were classifying all this as Agent Orange and from Vietnam, she didn't have a lotta kind words for those people.

Interviewer

What was it like getting to know your children again?

Russell Elder

I was a lot more militant with my kids before then. When I came back, not just my kids, but my people, my men were more important than regulations. I became a pain in the butt to a lot of commanding officers because I just did not blindly follow things. So that was a problem. But I changed totally. People were more important than regulations.

Interviewer

Did it take a long time for them to get to know you again?

Russell Elder

I don't think so. They were going through their growth problems at that point, 11, 12, 10. Not easy ages to be. Not 17, but not easy ages to be. And I'm glad I changed at that because my son and I got a lot closer because of it. And we lost him in '72 to a stupid accident. And so I had a year or so with him behaving differently.

Interviewer

If you hadn't been wounded, how many months more did you have to go?

Russell Elder

Most of July, August, September, October. Four months.

Interviewer

And do you think it would've been different had you not been wounded?

Russell Elder

It's not so much what my wound did for me. It's what being in that hospital in San Diego did to me. I'm sitting there, and all right, so I've got this thing. But it operates.

Interviewer

So you're lying in that hospital.

Russell Elder

There's nothing like an entire ward, which is the only one I was exposed to, of people who are wounded worse than you to bring you back to reality. I had an arm. It was gonna work. And once the pain was gone, that was great. They had a kid in there that was burned over 30 or 40 percent of his body. All he did at night was scream. And when they changed his bandages he screamed even more. And they were trying to get skin grafts on him and they didn't wanna take.

The kid next to me was a Marine. He was probably 18. He'd been split like a chicken because he had a few little fragments hit him, and they went into him and searched his whole body cavity to make sure there weren't any inside. I understand that, but again, you have to recover from something that's just as traumatic as a bypass surgery. There were other people in there without arms, without legs. And you begin to think you're a lot luckier than you thought you were. And I'm twice as lucky 'cause I'm not there anymore. And some of these poor bastards are going back.

Interviewer

You said you saw "Apocalypse Now" and you didn't like it. What do you think about the movies you have seen?

Russell Elder

You know what the most realistic Vietnam movie I ever saw? "The Boys of Company C." That to me was Vietnam.

Just total and absolute bull hockey every foot of the way. And that's how I felt about the war, too. After a while you say "Well, we can't get showers, we can't get bathing, we can't get anything. We'll just go out here in the bomb crater and bathe in that water." And that's what they did. And they just relaxed and started fighting the war like it wasn't there. It's a movie you'd have to see. The last part of it where the kid throws himself on the grenade is kinda gory.

Interviewer

So you were all over Vietnam for your assignments.

Russell Elder

Well, I Corps when I was in Da Nang, from the time I told that commander to get that photo lab off my back, I had 90-day permissive orders the whole time I was there. I'd just go in and say, "Okay. These expire tomorrow." And I had a new set in my hand that night. I could go anywhere and do anything.

Interviewer

So you saw the whole country?

Russell Elder

Pretty much.

Interviewer

Well, one of the stories I did was involving what we called circuit-riding chaplains. We had a number of chaplains that would go around the detachments, and hold services. And it so happened that at this point in time, the Lutheran chaplain was going up on Marble Mountains to hold Christmas services for the guys that were up there. Now, Marble Mountain is this two big hunks of mountain that rise up outta nowhere, kinda like Devil's Tower. And they have detachments on top of the mountains.

And while you're climbing up the mountain, you're on a rope. You climb up a rope to get to the top. And all the way up I'm looking to the side saying, "There's claymore mines everywhere." And I said, "Why are there claymore mines?" He says, "Well, it's really very simple." He says, "During the day we own the mountain. At night, Charlie owns the sides and we don't want him coming up and not knowing it."

So there were trip wires on these mines so you had to know where you were going, and you had to have a guide to get you there. The other guy was a Methodist chaplain, and we went to things like Phu Bai up along the Cua Dai River, which was a Seabee detachment, and he held services up there.

Interviewer

Talk about the pictures of the Vietnamese people.

Russell Elder

The kids are what all of it's about as far as I'm concerned. There's an old expression, which says that they have

killed innocent civilians. In a great many countries, I don't think many civilians are innocent. The innocent German civilians, I don't think a lot of them were that innocent. They were just ignoring things. They had their bread and circuses, so that's all they cared about, which is what cabaret was about. But the people on the street, schoolgirls, the kid carrying his little brother around covered in what looked like reproduction fluid, you know, the mimeograph stuff, the purple fluid in a mimeograph. He had it head to foot. He'd got into it somewhere; probably in a dump.

And that's what they did. They went out and raided the dumps to find stuff to eat, to use, whatever, to wear. And little girls mostly manning shops, as I said before, who was gonna man the shop? The old man was probably in the Vietnamese Army; the old women out in the marketplace. I had a couple in there that really struck me, which was in Saigon there's a blind beggar. And he doesn't have a cup. He's got a Hunts peach can. Now, you know where that Hunts peach can came from. There's two choices: it was either stolen from the PX, or he dug it out of a trash dump.

And there's another one of a woman there who was blind who's got a baby in front of her. And the baby's looking out like saying, "Okay, ma, here comes one." And I just loved the people. The people are what all of it's about. In fact, my wife used to tell me, she says, "You're a people shooter." And I said, "Yeah, that's true." I'll photograph people every time given the chance because they're the real story.

People are what life is all about. And in Vietnam, that's what it was all about, except we weren't doing them any favors doing what we were doing. We were actually destroying their whole civilization.

Interviewer

Tell us about the fall of Saigon.

Russell Elder

We had a New Year's Eve party at our villa. We had two maids. Loved those two maids. They were just great people. I don't know whose side they were on, but they were great women. They'd come in with their babies. If their babies were upset, they'd take a little teaspoon, put hot wax in it and rub it over their tummy to chase away the evil spirits. I thought, "My God, we haven't done that since 1917!" They'd come in bruised. If they made their old man mad, he'd beat on 'em until they did things the way they wanted 'em.

I think every corporal in the Vietnamese Army had a moped or bigger. If they were a sergeant, they had a Jeep, right. And they'd be loaded, absolutely loaded. You'd see a guy with his wife, two kids and their pet hamster on a moped. You understand how big a moped is? It's smaller than a scooter. Sometimes they'd come in with huge crates of produce on the back and the front to go to the market. Now, that's fun. I mean, it's fun to do that. It's fun to shoot that.

We had a woman next door who ran a sewing school. She taught little Vietnamese girls to sew. And her husband came over one night and we were all playing poker, which we all want to do in the Navy, and he wanted to learn how to play poker. And we told him, we said, "I don't know. You may not wanna do this if you don't understand that game." "No, no, no. I wanna learn. I wanna learn." He learned. It cost his wife a lot, but he learned.

Interviewer

Did you shoot the red light district?

Russell Elder

No. No, I didn't. I didn't go into the bars because they didn't interest me. I've got pictures of that from other parts of the world, but not Vietnam. For one thing, I didn't want to go into Vietnam areas like that because they very often got attacked. You know, the sappers would come in and throw a satchel charge in there, and kaboom, and there you were.

However, one of my EOD young 'ens, he was in his 20s, and right behind our encampment there on Tuan Chau Island outside of Da Nang was a village. And he had a girlfriend in the village. And the only way you could get to that village at night was to be clandestine. So he'd put on his black pajamas. That's what the Viet Cong wore all the time, black pajamas 'cause you can't see in the night, right, unless the light hits you directly. And he's put on his straw hat and he'd go over the fence in back of the unit.

Well, one night he went over, and I'm saying he's an idiot. There's no way. There's too many horror stories about these little shops and things that were killing guys off when they came in for Coke, and all that kinda thing. The next morning he came back and he was shook. He was shaking all over. And I asked him, I said, "What happened?" He says, "Well, I was in there in the hooch with her, and about one o'clock in the morning I hear all this noise outside. And I kinda peek through the window," and he says, "There's carts and trucks and everybody moving." And he said, "I got scared. I took out my .45 and jacked a round into the chamber and I sat over in the corner opposite the door." He said, "She came over and says, 'Joe, Joe. What's the matter?'" And he says, "I think there's Viet Cong out there." "Oh, shit, Joe. We're all Viet Cong here. Go back to bed." He never went back.

Interviewer

Are you aware of what's going on back home at this time, the protests and all?

Russell Elder

Yeah, to some degree. The other thing is that while I was over there we all had tape recorders, big tape recorders. And we were constantly playing Simon and Garfunkel. And I started listening to what they were singing. I started listening to what a lot of these guys were singing. And it started making a lotta sense. And that just solidified in my mind the question of, "What the hell are we doing here, other than destroying a country?" And I think that's what we

were doing. I still do.

I just don't see any sense in it. I know that General Westmoreland was hopefully Johnson's McArthur. He never gave Westmoreland the freedom to be McArthur because he was micromanaging the entire war, him and McNamara who later admitted it was stupid.

Interviewer

So you were aware of the protests, but it wasn't a topic of conversation?

Russell Elder

We were aware of it in a way. We were aware of it if it came through in letter, or some other means. It wasn't normally broadcast on Armed Forces Radio, or covered by Stars and Stripes newspapers. My brother knew about it. He'd write me sometimes and say, "Boy, they really have got their head up their butt here." He was a believer. I wasn't.

Interviewer

Describe the beauty of Vietnam.

Russell Elder

There were some areas of Vietnam that were beautiful. China Beach was a great beach. And everybody went to China Beach, including Viet Cong. That was their beach, too. And the Army would come in there on R and R, and the Marines. And they'd stay there for maybe a week and just swim and have fun on the beach. It was a great beach.

I'm trying to think of what the one was up farther north. They were gonna make a big resort out of it when we won the war. There were people already vying to buy up the land, and build a big resort up there. It was another one of those things that had great beaches. The jungles were actually beautiful. The triple-canopy jungles were beautiful. You just didn't wanna be in them at night. But the green from the air. Fly over Hue way up north. Hue was a provincial capital, and when it flooded during the monsoons there was water everywhere, and it was divided into rice paddies and that kinda thing. And from the air it was pretty. From the ground it just looked muddy and wet.

But some of the Catholic churches, some of the old Buddhist temples were all kinda neat in a way. I didn't shoot any of them because I didn't wanna get into a hassle over who was shooting what religion, and you could do that. And I didn't do that. But it was a pretty country in a lotta ways. I have no desire to go back there.

Interviewer

Talk about the fall of Saigon.

Russell Elder

Well, I thought it was inevitable for one thing. If I had thought anything, it was too bad we had to leave so many

Vietnamese who were probably going to be retrained or dead behind. But I thought it was time we were outta there. I thought it was long time we were outta there.

Interviewer

Did you react emotionally to what you saw, those images of the helicopters on the roof of the embassy?

Russell Elder

A little.

Interviewer

What did you think? What did you feel?

Russell Elder

Felt like I wasted two years. Felt like I got shot for absolutely no reason. It's hard to put into words what you feel about something like that. When you watch this one helicopter trying to get off the pad, and people hanging onto the skids trying to get out of there. I don't know how you could begin to say what you felt about that. I felt sorry for the people.

I felt sorry for the South Vietnamese. They had been led down a great big primrose path by us. Saigon at one time was called the Paradise of the Orient. It had been a beautiful city. When we left, it was maybe slightly above a slum.

Interviewer

Are there any sights or sounds or any things that bring back Vietnam, like the sound of a helicopter?

Russell Elder

Every time a Huey flies over, yeah.

Interviewer

Tell me about that.

Russell Elder

Well, they've still got Hueys flying around, and when I hear one I know it. You know a Huey. You never forget the sound of a Huey.

Interviewer

What's it sound like?

Russell Elder

It's a "fwop," "fwop," "fwop," "fwop," "fwop," "fwop." You never forget the sound of it. When you hear it, you just say, "Ah, Huey." And they still use 'em. They're around. The Air National Guard and the Army still use 'em.

Interviewer

What's the purpose of PSYOPs? What did the recording say?

Russell Elder

I can't tell you exactly what the recording said because I don't speak Vietnamese very much outside of (in Vietnamese). That's it.

Interviewer

What's the purpose of PSYOPs?

Russell Elder

The purpose of it is to lure the Viet Cong in to surrender, and give up their arms and to quit fighting. The object being that instead of living in mud and filth and whatever, they could actually have decent housing and be fed and clothed and treated decently. It worked occasionally. Every once in a while you'd get some guy, "Chieu Hoi, Chieu Hoi." But not very often.

Interviewer

What were the messages saying?

Russell Elder

Well, basically quit fighting your brothers and surrender, and we will give you clean clothes and food and a clean place to sleep, and we will treat you fair. In essence that was it.

Interviewer

Is your brother still alive?

Russell Elder

Yeah.

Interviewer

And he served early. When did he serve?

Russell Elder

I think he was there in '66, I believe.

Interviewer

Was he infantry?

Russell Elder

Well, he was Army, but he was EOD. In fact, in that little package I've got part of the story that he wrote.

Interviewer

Is there anything else that you wanna share with us, a message that you've always wanted to express about your experience in Vietnam?

Russell Elder

Well, all I can say is we didn't learn much. We didn't learn much. We're right back in the middle of it now with Afghanistan. We're in a war that nobody can win. All you can do is lose it. Nobody's ever won a war in Afghanistan as a foreign country. Even the Afghans can't win a war in Afghanistan.

Interviewer

Thank you.