Jeffrey Harris - Part 2
Salt Lake City, Utah

Jeffrey Harris
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Interviewer
Give us your full name.

Jeffrey Harris
Jeffrey D. Harris

Interviewer
And where are you from?

Jeffrey Harris
Originally from St. Anthony, Idaho, grew up there.

Interviewer
St. Anthony, Idaho?

Jeffrey Harris
Yes.

Interviewer
What was it liked growing up there?

Jeffrey Harris
St. Anthony is a great place to grow up. It's right on the Snake River. I spent my youth in the river. So it's farm country. Potatoes.

Interviewer
What year did you graduate from high school?

Jeffrey Harris
1960.

Interviewer
That's before the draft. That's long before --

Jeffrey Harris
No, they were drafting.

Interviewer
Were they?

Jeffrey Harris
Oh the draft, yeah, you had to sign up for the draft. You all signed up for the draft board. You did that when you turned 18 years old, everybody did. But the big draft, the big call up for Vietnam did not come until the later sixties. But everybody had an obligation to sign up for the draft and do something.

Interviewer
So what year did you go to Vietnam?

Jeffrey Harris
I went in in 1966.

Interviewer
What were you doing between high school and when you were drafted?

Jeffrey Harris
Oh, I've done a lot of stuff. When I graduated from high school I worked up in Island Park, Idaho, for the forest service, doing surveying. Started college at Utah State in Logan. Started working summers up in Alaska doing surveying, construction surveying, did about three years up there; three summers and one winter. So I paid for most of my way through undergraduate school.
Graduated from undergraduate school in '65, a year late because I had also spent six months traveling in Europe. Every place from Northern Germany down to Africa, North Africa. Hitchhiking and doing that sort of thing. Got married in 1966 and was in graduate school at Utah State and got a draft notice.

Interviewer
What were you studying?

Jeffrey Harris
Psychology.

Interviewer
Did you want to become a psychologist?
Jeffrey Harris
That's what I do now. I've got a PhD in that nonsense.
Interviewer
So you got a draft notice?
Jeffrey Harris
Yeah.
Interviewer
So you had no choice?
Jeffrey Harris
No. Well, I went down and tried to talk them out of it because I was married and in school, but they said no. And so the draft board makes the decisions on that, by the way. And so I decided to join on what they call the college opt program. I graduated from college so I could join and automatically go to OCS, but if something happened and I flunked out of OCS, or opted out, I only had to do two years. So I was what they call a two-year RA. Regular Army was somebody that that joined, generally did at least three. So I ended up dropping out in advanced infantry training. I said, “It looks like I'm going to die in Vietnam.” The insurance is the same if I'm enlisted man, so I opted out.
Then they sent me to learn how to drive armored personnel carriers. Then I went to Texas; Fort Hood, Texas, and was basically–I was an infantry man, but then my wife got mad and sent a letter to Senator Church, at that time, said what's he doing down there in the infantry and Senator Church sent her a letter back and so they started talking to me about doing other things and who knows. The whole unit went—this doesn't happen very often – I was with the 198th Infantry, Light Infantry Brigade, and the whole unit went, by ship, we went by ship. Went under San Francisco under the Golden Gate heading for Vietnam; three troop ships. By then they'd placed me in the job as a —it's like a psychiatric technician. I was a technician but I was an enlisted man.
Interviewer
So they put you in a medical unit?
Jeffrey Harris
Yeah. I ended up in Chu Lai which is a big, pretty safe base. It's a big base, south of Da Nang, a major airport kind of thing. I ended up there with the Americal Division, the psychiatrist for the Americal Division. And so that was the only training I got. I had done some graduate school, I didn't know what the hell I was doing.
Interviewer
So you had been assigned to a psychiatrist?
Jeffrey Harris
Yeah.
Interviewer
And he trained you?
Jeffrey Harris
I worked there. He and I had our battles.
Interviewer
Really?
Jeffrey Harris
Oh yeah. Yeah. Which culminated in -- they're kind of funny if you want to hear them.
Interviewer
Oh sure.
Jeffrey Harris
(Laughs)
Interviewer
Absolutely.
Jeffrey Harris
Okay, I'm with the 198th Infantry Brigade, that's where I'm assigned. And they lend me over to, I think it was the 20th Medical Something-or-other Company with the psychiatrists. And there were three of us there that were psych techs like me, and they sent me over there because they knew I better learn something if I'm going to be doing this stuff. So I worked under the psychiatrist for a while.
At some point the commanding officer of that medical unit decided that he wanted to lay sidewalks and plant palm trees. And so what we were supposed to do is, after we finished our daily work we were supposed to go out and

work his projects of sidewalks and palm trees. And I said, "No, I'm not going to do that." And I was on good standing. I knew what I was doing. The psychiatrist got real mad, you know, “You've got to go out and do this.” I says, “It's very simple, you go to the commanding officer of the medical unit, he tells his first sergeant to go over and tell my first sergeant that he wants me to lay sidewalks. And my first sergeant, if he wants me to do it, will tell me to do it.” Well, he balked on that.
More than likely he went back and the first sergeant over there says I'm not going to go over and tell his first sergeant he's got to, you know? So then it got kind of weird after that, because they got mad at me and the psychiatrist—one time he says he was going to Article 15 me. You know what an Article 15 is?

Interviewer

Tell us.

Jeffrey Harris

It's an informal disciplinary procedure that you can go before your CO, and they can take a stripe, they can take some pay, they can make you do extra duty, but it's informal. But you don't have to accept it. You can say no, I don't accept the informal. Which I told him, I says, “I don't accept Article 15's, you're going to have to court martial me.” And so that's how it all got going.
I went in there one day, and the psychiatrist comes up to me and says, “Your XO wants to see you.” The XO is second in rank over at the other company. He says, “Your XO wants to see you.” He said, “I don't know, he just wants to see you.” So I go over to see the XO –

Interviewer

So you have a psychiatrist who wants you to make the place look pretty.

Jeffrey Harris

Yeah. Well the commanding officer of that medical unit wanted us to do it and he's telling the psychiatrist that I should go out and lay sidewalks and plant palm trees. Sounds like something out of Mr. Roberts, doesn't it? Anyway, so I say no. I will do it, I'm not going to not do it, but you need to go through the proper procedures. You go over and tell the commanding officer to tell his first sergeant to go over and tell my first sergeant that I need to do this duty, and I will do it. They still keep pressing me. The psychiatrist says, “I'm going to give you an Article 15,” to which I said, “I don't accept Article 15's, you're going to have to court martial me.”
Another one was, all of the other guys are really angry at you because you're not doing this duty and they're out doing it. And I was rotten about it, too, because I'd go out to the shower and throw a towel over my shoulder. Anyway, to which I said no, I'm a hero. I'm a hero. They like it. Somebody's getting out of this damn thing, somebody's fighting back. And I was. You are. They didn't seem to understand that.
But the guys weren't mad at me. They were glad somebody was getting away with it. They didn't want to be out there doing that. So it kind of slows down and then the psychiatrist comes to me and says, “Your XO wants to talk to you, the second in command over at the 198th.” And he didn't tell me what it was about or anything like that, so he gives me a jeep and I drive over to that unit and go in and see my XO. And he was kind of embarrassed because we'd talked before this and there were a couple of complaints.
One was that I was out of uniform. When they sent me there, they sent me so quickly that I didn't get all of the jungle fatigues and everything, which I wanted anyway. So I had stateside fatigues and that was not a problem. I said yeah, get me some fatigues, I don't want these damn things, I want some cool jungle fatigues. But he complimented me on my moustache the week before. He'd seen me and I had a moustache that went down to here and that's against Army regulations and so he tells me that and I said, it's not attached to my soul. I said if you've got a razor we'll get rid of it. He gave me his razor and I cut the whole thing off, that's no big deal.
Then he says, “The big thing is, you're not doing your duties over there.” I says, “What do you mean?” He says, “Well, they said you're not doing your duties.” Well, they hadn't told him what my duties were. They just said, “You aren't doing your duties.” They were chicken. So I proceeded to tell him, “Look, I see as many clients as anybody else over there and plus I'm the only one that can type. So I'm doing all of the typing for the psychiatrists and everything there, so I'm doing extra duty.” And he says, “Well, okay.” So he sends me back over. So I've got all new fatigues, my moustache is gone. And there was a captain social worker there, they didn't say a word. They're not even saying, “How did it go,” or anything like that. They're just not saying a word.
And then on Fridays, they would have this bitch session where we could all get together and you could bitch out loud and it doesn't matter who's the captain, who's the major, whatever. And so when the bitch session came down, I just came unglued. He was always calling enlisted men as being passive-aggressive. Passive-aggressive was, you know—you put gum in the typewriter rather than coming out and saying go to hell. So I was sitting there telling them to go to hell – and I had been actively aggressive all along, by the way – so I chew the hell out of them.
The social worker starts saying something and I turn to him and say, "You're just Major Casper's little lackey lapdog anyway, shut up." So I was having fun. I says, “What's more, I'm not planting palm trees.” So that was the end of it. The psychiatrist decided that he'd cured me of being passive-aggressive. But about two weeks later, if any of you remember there was a siege on Hue right after TET and Hue was a mess. The VC still had Hue and I get called in by the captain, the social worker, and he says, “We've got something for you, Jeff, but it's strictly voluntary.” Strictly

voluntary. I says, “What's that?” He said, “We want to go to Hue with the 196th.”
And my stomach goes, *boop!* Because Chu Lai's a real safe place, okay? My stomach goes *boop!* and I looked at him for a while and I couldn't pass up a one-liner. Couldn't pass it up. I turned to him and says, "I've been wanting out of this chicken-shit unit anyway." Do you know where that comes from?

Interviewer
No.

Jeffrey Harris
In the movie "Audie Murphy" in which Audie Murphy plays Audie Murphy, the most decorated—that's what he said when he went out. He says, “I've been wanting out of this chicken-shit unit anyway.” And that's when he went out and got all those medals. Anyway, it went past him, I was the only one that got a laugh out of it. So a week or two later—no, the next couple of days I'm on my way up north. Ended up not in Hue, went up to a place called Camp Evans which is past Hue. And I went in a convoy all the way up there. So I went up there with the 196th Infantry Brigade, and that's how I got out there.

Interviewer
So you became a field specialist in evaluating psychological trauma?

Jeffrey Harris
What this is, each brigade has a medical unit. And the medical unit is essentially for triage, to take care, make sure they got—it was to fix them up as best you can and then they may go to a MASH unit, or we had a little hospital there that we could keep them in for a few days, that sort of thing. So I went to that. And the CO there, the first one was a captain, the other was a major, they were doctors. So they were all doctors, and a lot of medics, so it was sort of an emergency room is what you do. And so I was there to take care of any of the psychiatrics that came out of the field. So that was my job.

Interviewer
Had you been seeing people that had been in battle at Chu Lai?

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah. But not like I did out there. But yes.

Interviewer
So in Chu Lai you were seeing what kind of person?

Jeffrey Harris
Some of them were psychotic, some people that were psychotic that they were getting back there and we had one guy that was totally amnesic, you had to give him all kinds of stuff, guys that might walk in with something. Do you want to hear about one of my heroes?

Interviewer
Sure.

Jeffrey Harris
Another thing that they would stick us with, the Army was very different back then when it came to gays. It wasn't any don't ask, don't tell. It was if you'd tell, you've got to prove. Yeah. Most of these people were drafted or they enlisted when they were drafted they're 19, 20 years old. A lot of them didn't want to be there, so the CID, the Criminal Investigation Division, would have to make sure that you were gay so that you weren't just spoofing them and getting out of the Army. So to prove you were gay—no, they didn't ask you to do that.

Interviewer
I was just wondering, what was the criteria?

Jeffrey Harris
They had to give names and dates and places that they've had sexual relations in Vietnam, which is a ratty thing to do. So they had to rat out other gays. So we got one who was a really mean-spirited bitch. He was a mean-spirited bitch, slut, gay asshole, okay? And I like gays but this guy, he was fingering everybody and he was mean and he was a slut. When they do that, then all of these other people that he fingered, they'd have to bring them into the clinic and we'd have to interview them, as if we can tell anything. You know? We don't know anything. Our bag was, if they said they're gay then they're gay. If they say they're not gay then they're not gay.
So we had several of them come in and we would interview them. And one of them came in, good looking kid from New England someplace. Goes through and listens to everything and says, “No, I'm not gay. I am not gay.” We says, “okay.” We send him back to duty. And by the way, we often didn't even write things down. We didn't keep paperwork on a lot of things because there was no confidentiality. The CID could come in and look at our records any time. What's your question?

Interviewer
That's baffling to me because that's so sacred.

Jeffrey Harris
Oh no, not in the Army. There was no confidentiality. You don't have that. So we just didn't write some things down, just didn't put them in writing. But this kid comes in, maybe a couple of weeks, three weeks later. And he comes in and starts talking to me about I don't know what, and then he turns to me and he says, “I am gay.” I go, “Okay.” I said, “You know what you've got to do. You've got to go back to your commanding officer, say, ‘I am gay,’ then you go to the CID and you know what you've got to do to do this.” And he says, “Okay.” And then he starts talking and he talks and I listen, he talks and I listen, and then he talks. And he talks himself out of going, turn himself in for being gay. Talks himself out of it. I said, “Okay, fine. Go back to your unit.” So he goes back to his unit. And you know by now everybody in his unit knows he's gay. And he is gay. And he comes back. So he goes back and then he shows up again maybe three weeks, a month later. He says, “I've had it out there, it's dangerous out there. I've had it out there. I'm gay and I want to go home. Okay.” And I listen to him and I listen to him and he talks himself out of it and goes back in the field. He's my hero.

Interviewer
Why's he your hero?

Jeffrey Harris
Because he could have got out and he went back. He went back to his squad. And you know they knew he was gay by now. I mean everybody knows what's going on. And they're accepting him. If you look out for your buddy, your squad, they don't give a shit who you are. They don't give a shit what race you are. They don't give a shit if you're gay. They don't care. And he's one of my heroes and I hope that he's alive and living in Massachusetts with his partner and they're married. But I don't know what happened to him. He may not have made it. I don't know.

Interviewer
So these are the kind of things in Chu Lai. When you get out in the field, how do things change?

Jeffrey Harris
Well, I get more responsibility. I don't have anybody to look over me. I was looking for somebody to look over me. I wanted somebody to help me. I didn't want this responsibility. I'm in the position that people that I'm working with I'm going to send them back quite often and some of them will die. So it's quite a bit of responsibility. But I was looking to the doctors to help me through the thing.

And then we had a thing happen one day that changed everything. By that time, the commanding officer there, the doctor, was Major Mac. We called him Major Mac, which is said affectionately, because his name was MacDonald but we all called him Major Mac. We got a guy in and comes in on a stretcher, good-looking black kid. To me they were all good-looking. I was 26 years old. I turned 26 years old in Vietnam and I was an old man next to these 19-year-old healthy, good looking kids. God damn.

But he comes in, he's thrashing around. They've got him on a stretcher and he's thrashing around and Major Mac says, "He's yours, Harris, he's psychiatric." And I went up and started working with him a little and I said, “It doesn't feel right. This doesn't feel right,” and I go back to Major Mac and I says, “There's something wrong here. It doesn't feel right. Do a neurological on him.” Well, there's not much you can do out in the field in terms of neurological. He did some reflex tests and he says he's a little flaccid on the right side, but other than that he's yours, he's yours. And I go back and I'm still uncomfortable and then they decide to give him Thorazine which is a major sedative. And they give him Thorazine and I go back and I started looking at him more closely and I see that there's a little cut right here. Looks like a razor cut like he just—shaving and cut yourself. Looked like that. I went back to the Major and I says, “He's got a wound. There's a wound right there. This still doesn't fit.” And Major Mac says, “Get blood pressure on this kid.” So all the sudden, they get the blood pressure and the blood pressure's just going diving and the Thorazine was the wrong thing to do. Anyway we go through all that stuff that you go through, find a vein, they're trying to get fluids going and the kid dies on us.

And they go in and do an x-ray and sure enough there's a little piece of shrapnel that got into the brain stem. Now this kid would have—we'd have probably never saved this kid with that kind of an injury but Major Mac, he went and got drunk for about two days. He really felt bad. And so did I because I was being passive. I wasn't coming out and saying, “Wait a minute, Mac, this is not mine, God damn it, let's look at this.” I was being passive and he wasn't listening to me. He wasn't paying attention to what I was saying.

And it changed both our relationships after that. I started taking responsibility for what I was doing. I wrote out doctor's orders, I did the medications, they were mine. I could tell an MD to get away from my client. One of the big reasons I would write out the doctor's orders, if I kept somebody over for a while then if something went wrong they'd come and get me rather than an MD so I would do that sort of stuff. So they were my clients.

Interviewer
How heavy was your duty?

Jeffrey Harris
It would go on for a long period nothing happening, and then you get four or five or you get several. I got four one night of what they call, then they called them “acute situational reactions.” Guys coming out of the field, just dingy,

crying, scared, confused. Been in action.

Interviewer

What was that? What were they experiencing?

Jeffrey Harris

Well back in the Korean War they called it “combat fatigue.” That kind of thing. Before that it was, well it's had several names. But in Vietnam it was, under the old diagnostic manual, it was “acute situational reaction.” Now it's in the DSM-III in the diagnostic manual as “acute anxiety disorder.” So it's different from PTSD which is post-traumatic, which happens later. This is traumatic. If somebody were just in an accident and confused and everything, then they would be suffering from an anxiety reaction.

Interviewer

So what would you do for these guys?

Jeffrey Harris

Talk them down. Get them settled down, talk about what happened. Go over the thing. The theory was that it helps to vent to get them to say exactly what happened. Where they were, what they're scared of. So I listened to their stories. People getting overrun by Charlie, buddies being killed, those sorts of things.

Interviewer

So did you have a hospital or a facility for these people? Were you passing them on to somebody else?

Jeffrey Harris

No, I was keeping them. I could do what I wanted. I could send them back if I wanted. I could send them back to the psychiatrist, but I kept them there. I was operating under the theory, right or wrong, that it was best to deal with it now. They'd had a lot of bad luck back in the Korean War especially, when they took their combat fatigues and would take them immediately out and hospitalized them, is that they never seem to get over it. They were in the VA Hospital forever. So I didn't treat them as sick. They weren't sick. Now whether this is right or wrong, this is what I did. I didn't treat them as sick. I treated it as normal. And it was. And it is.

Interviewer

Explain that.

Jeffrey Harris

There's no healthy way to deal with death around you, including your own imminent demise. There's no healthy way to deal with that. It's all survival. It's all, “It could happen to any of us,” kind of a thing. “Maybe if I went through what you went through, I'd be doing the same thing.” There's nothing abnormal about it. It's war. And it's crazy.

Interviewer

So you're saying this is actually a healthy reaction to a bad situation?

Jeffrey Harris

No, I wouldn't call it healthy, but it was not an abnormal reaction. Go back to being a crying kid and ask for mom to help. “Help me, help me, help me.” It's that sort of a thing you're dealing with. So I would talk them down. I'd talk them through it, and I had my own way of doing things.

At some point they'd say, “I can't go back to duty,” and I'd say, “We'll talk about that later. We'll talk about that tomorrow.” But what I wanted to do at that point was get a good night sleep and new, clean clothes. So I would send them to shower. I'd get them new, clean clothes. Throw away their old clothes. New, clean clothes and I gave them a real, kind of a little cocktail of a sedative kind of thing, that I would give them. The doctors before that would give them Thorazine, which they'd wake up hung-over as hell, so I gave them just a—and they would generally sleep well.

And then I would meet with them the next day and we would go over it and they says, “I can't go back,” and I said “Well, you got a choice.” The only thing I had behind me at that point in terms of stuff—in college I'd gotten involved in existentialism so I was into the notion of choice. And I say, “You got a choice, you got to take responsibility.” I says, “You can go back and refuse to go out.” And they'd say, “Well I could end up in the stockade.” I says, “I don't know where you'll end up. You might. You might end up someplace folding blankets, I don't know, but you've got that choice. You can either refuse to go or you can go back out.” And then we would work on it, and they'd say, “Well, I can't go today.” “When can you go?” And we'd work out a deal. They might say, “Three days, I'll be ready in three days,” and we would shake hands. And I'd tell them I didn't want them sitting around here moping, I wanted them to make the best out of the three days, get some beer, going to some movies, and then you'll be going back out. And that's what I did. Right or wrong.

Interviewer

So you're an older guy, you've been around the world? You come from an artistic family.

Jeffrey Harris

Yeah.

Interviewer
And you were married, you had a lot of time to think and speculate. You're a philosopher. So you had probably a very strong opinion of that war?

Jeffrey Harris
Well yeah. Cronkite and I came to the same conclusion at the same time; we ain't going to win this sucker.

Interviewer
So how do you fit that in yourself of evaluating people that go out into a war that you're not happy with?

Jeffrey Harris
One is, it does have to do with personal responsibility. And also that I believed, at that time, that I was doing the best thing for them. See, they're kids that watched John Wayne movies, too. Okay? They're kids that have a sense of honor, courage, and if I say, “Okay, I'm going to send you back to the rear, you're sick, you're deficient in character.” No, I wasn't going to do that. They had to make a choice.

Interviewer
Deficient in character, is that a criteria?

Jeffrey Harris
That's me. I'm saying that's the kind of thing, yeah, “I can't go back out there. I'm too weak. I can't handle that danger. These other guys can, but I can't.”
Furthermore there's this thing that nobody was in favor of the war in Vietnam. All the hats said FTA – “Fuck the Army.” Nobody was patriotic. There was no patriotic war. People had what they call a 365-day countdown in the army. They had calendars, they'd count down 365-days and they were gone. They went back to the world. They called it the world. We weren't in the world. This was not real. When we got done, we'd go back to the world.

Interviewer
So you're an outpost trying to bring some kind of sense or some kind of measuring stick to all of this.

Jeffrey Harris
To?

Interviewer
Your job.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah.

Interviewer
So tell me about some more things that happened.

Jeffrey Harris
Well I'm not out in the field. Yeah. I got a combat medic badge, but as I tell my good buddies that were really out there, nobody ever shot at me personally. These guys were shot at personally. So I don't like to tout myself as having experienced that. I was in rocket attacks, but I don't count that.

Interviewer
So how about the drugs. Can you mention the effects of that?

Jeffrey Harris
There was a lot of marijuana, yeah. Marijuana, marijuana it was all over the place. You could buy a pre-rolled, 10 pre-rolled marijuana sticks, cigarettes, for a dollar. And they were in a little plastic bag that had been ironed down. So it was quite prevalent. It wasn't terribly good stuff, generally. But you could get a thing they called Thai Stick once in a while. The Thai Stick had opium soaked, and that gave you a real buzz. Most of us used marijuana. Everybody smoked pot.

Interviewer
Did they have any debilitating effect on guys?

Jeffrey Harris
Smart ones out in the field didn't use it. In the rear, nah. When I first started using it, I got caught on something where I had to go over and see somebody and it scared me, but after that it didn't bother me. I'm high and, no. And it wasn't that great of marijuana. It's nothing like they get now. But you got a lot of it. And it was cheap. No, I don't see it as, the marijuana as having the debilitating effects.

Interviewer
What was?

Jeffrey Harris
Well, we didn't have that much of it where we were, but the opioids I understand—I didn't have to deal with that that much. I didn't have guys that were on the opioids, the opium. We medics often had stuff, they'd come and try to get it from us from Dexadrine, an amphetamine kind of stuff. People smoked. Beer was worse for everybody then. It was easy to become a drunk there.

Interviewer
We've had people tell us that they became alcoholic because they could only drink beer in the field because there was no fresh water.

Jeffrey Harris
That wouldn't surprise me. Yeah. A bunch of people were making a whole bunch of money selling beer to us. They wanted to get us on their beer. I remember when Charlie shot down a C-130 with our beer supply on it, and we had to drink this rotten beer from, I forget the name of it. Oh, it was terrible beer, and warm it was even worse. But, yeah, beer was cheap. It was easy. You get a case of beer. And then in the army you could get whiskey, too.
In fact, being in the position I was out in the field, I could take off easily. I was my own man. So I would go back to, I'd go hitchhike up to Da Nang on a chopper and pick up whiskey and bring it back for guys. My good buddy Doc Eason, he was a real drunk. He'd come kick at my cot that I'd sleep on at four o'clock in the morning, "Harris, mother fucker Harris, mother fucker Harris, wake up, wake up!" I'd say, “Shit, Eason what do you want?” He'd say, "Come on, let's get fucked up. Let's drink." Four o'clock in the morning Eason doing this crap.
By the way, it was a voluntary segregation, and I lived with the blacks where we were. They had another tent that had the confederate flag on it and all the guys from the South and I lived with the blacks. It was more fun.

Interviewer
Why was it more fun?

Jeffrey Harris
I liked the blacks. They knew how to laugh. They knew how to party better. And furthermore, I was from St. Anthony, Idaho, and I'm curious and I want to go live with the blacks. I want to find out who these guys are, you know? And it was a good experience. Got hairy at times, but it was a good experience.

Interviewer
How did it get hairy?

Jeffrey Harris
Oh, God. Had a guy sleeping next to me, we'd bunk right next to me. Guy's name was Dunlap and he was the cook. And Dunlap was the sweetest, quietest, easiest-going guy you'd ever seen. I mean Dunlap was just a nice guy. And I go in there one day and Dunlap is all red-faced and is arguing with this other black guy. And the black guy knew, he was an asshole. He was a conscientious objector which was okay, I don't care if he was a conscientious objector, but he'd throw it at everybody and he was intellectual and he was arrogant. He was just really arrogant. And I'd never seen Dunlap mad. I'd never seen him angry like this. And he was angry.
And I went in to sit down on my bunk and all of the sudden Dunlap reaches down, pulls out his M-16 and proceeds to throw a shell in the chamber and point it at this other guy. I said, “Oh shit.” And I hollered to Dunlap, I said, "Dunlap what are you doing?" I says, "Is there a shell in that chamber?" He turns around and he locks and loads another one, *clack, clack*. Points it at me and says, "Yeah, honky mother fucker." I looked at him and I said, "Dunlap this is awfully childish." And Dunlap looked at me, threw the gun down, started crying and walked out of the tent.
By the way, that's the only time living with those guys I ever used the term nigger. And that was that guy that came in, this arrogant guy. I says, "I don't care if somebody shoots that mother fucking nigger. I just didn't want it to be Dunlap." And nobody got mad at me using that term at that point 'cause everybody felt the same way. I just didn't want it to be Dunlap. So it could get hairy.

Interviewer
Did you listen to music?

Jeffrey Harris
Well, everybody had their boom boxes. Yeah, they'd have their boom boxes. And sometimes—this is when I didn't really—I was okay, but I didn't fit. There'd be some night or something like that and there'd be guys coming into the tent, these black guys that I didn't know coming into the tent and they all stripped down to the waist and they'd get the boom boxes going and getting soul music going and dancing and I would go in and be there. Nobody was going to bother me, but I didn't really fit. And I didn't try to. This was their party. But they were my friends. They were my buddies.

Interviewer
What kind of music was everybody listening to?

Jeffrey Harris
Oh, God. I'll tell you another funny story. New Years' Eve in Chu Lai. New Years' Eve 1968, Chu Lai. Like I said, Chu Lai was a big base. I don't know how many people, 15,000? And we were out on a point, in fact, I used to go down there and swim all the time. We were out on a point quite a ways away from the perimeter. But New Years' Eve, everybody was getting prepared for New Years' Eve. They'd gone down to the PX, they'd bought apple cider wine, booze, beer, alcohol and all the pot they could find. So I'm in this tent there, kind of a, sort of a tent, with these other kids. I call them kids, but anyway, they're starting early in the evening, they're starting to get screwed up, they're starting to get fucked up. They're drinking and smoking and everything's getting kind of wild.

I stayed there for most of it and then it got where I was pretty sure this was—I didn't want to stay there. These kids were getting a bit wild. So just before midnight, just a few minutes before midnight, I leave that and I had to walk up the hill and I was going up to an NCO club up there. So I was walking up the hill and I came over the hill and it hit midnight. Fifteen thousand guys were out there with M-16s, you know, .50 calibers, tracers, parachute flares, signal flares, everything. The whole world lit up. I mean it was, this was – put Fourth of July – no comparison. No comparison. The whole world lit up. And there were grenades going off down on the beach. Guys were throwing grenades out.
Well, somebody decided to shoot up the mess hall. Well, I'm between this guy and the mess hall, and all of the sudden I've got tracers going over my head. So I go down, I go down on my knees and I creep into the NCO club. And I had kind of a brick wall, it was about this high and then it was open. And I don't see anybody in there, but I'm on my knees, and I crawl around and these guys are sitting up against the wall and the one guy says, “Do you want a drink?” And he creeps over to the bar, brings me a drink. But the thing that stands out in my mind is that when I went in there, the juke box was playing Otis Redding, "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay." Every time I hear that song, I see that image. But it was that kind of music. I can't remember the music that much. I didn't get a lot of it. Some guys had boom boxes.

Interviewer

I want to hear some more about some of the cases you saw. You must have seen some really tragic things when it came to psychological trauma. Did you get guys who just couldn't be retrieved and had to be sent back?

Jeffrey Harris

No. Not at that point. I got guys in just like I was talking. Most of the people who were psychotic, who had serious stuff, would never have made it that far. Now we did have a psychotic in our unit out in the field. He was paranoid schizophrenic. But I kept him there. We kept him there. He stayed with the unit. In fact he was the only white guy who stayed in the tent. Later I brought him over to the tent because I had to watch him. And we kept him there. He would do things, he'd take care of the garbage and outhouses and do that kind of stuff. But the serious kind of psychotic kinds of stuff, they don't last. They wouldn't never got that close to the field. So basically what you were seeing is these kind of guys coming in that were just shook. Just really shook. And I don't know what's happened to them. I don't know, maybe they now are the PTSD people. I don't know.

Interviewer

You write poetry?

Jeffrey Harris

I have written some, yeah.

Interviewer

You write some about Vietnam?

Jeffrey Harris

No.

Interviewer

Did you write home?

Jeffrey Harris

Not much. I was terrible with that stuff, even though I had a wife. She sent me a boom box that I could send her tapes. But I don't know. It was something about it. I didn't keep that much in touch.

Interviewer

Were you keeping a calendar?

Jeffrey Harris

No. No, I refused to get the two-digit fidgets. They called them the fidgets. You get down to the—the two-digit fidgets were when you got under 100 days, 99 days and down. And the one-digit fidgets were when you got under ten. Guys would get scared.

Interviewer

So the one-digits, when they got scared, did you see more guys come in? Were guys trying to fake things to get out?

Jeffrey Harris

No. There was no kind of a pattern to any of that that I ever saw. There were guys that I thought were trying to fake. There were other guys that I'd say weren't faking which the psychiatrist thought was.
I got a kid in one day, he came in, he didn't come in on chopper or anything, he came in on his own. So he wasn't crisis, sort of. And he came in and he was blinking like this. And he says, “I've got this problem,” and I says “Why?” And he says, “I can't quit blinking.” And we talked more about it, and it was kind of, you know? And I says, “Well when does it happen?” He says, “It only seems to happen in the daytime, especially outside in the daytime.” I says, “Well, it kind of makes sense, doesn't it?” And he says, “What do you mean?” I says, “Well, if you go out on patrol

and everything, you have to go out in the daytime, so if you've got this going on you can't go out on patrol and you can't get shot."
He said, "Well really?" And I said, "Yeah, doesn't it make sense?" And he says, "Yeah." I says, "Do you really want to get rid of it?" And he says, "Yes, I really do." And I says, "Well, the thing you do then, is you go back to your unit, go to your commander and say, 'I want to go out on the next patrol.'" I says, "It will go away." Now the guy took off. Now the psychiatrist told me the guy was faking and I says, "Well I got this evidence that points different. And he says, "What's that?" And I says, "I saw the guy at a stand-down party about two months later and he came up and thanked me." Who knows? Was he faking? Why would he come and thank me? Or was this a reaction because he's so God damned scared?
And another guy, I sent him back to duty and told him he really didn't need help, and I gave him a drug to take and I told him not to take it when it was dangerous, but he could take it. And actually all it was was a nasal congestion pill. I gave it because it was so pretty. So I did some of that. What do you do? He was faking.

Interviewer
What was your state of mind in all of this?

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah. I'm not sure I was being reflexive. I'm not sure I was paying attention to me through all of this. Like, what do you do? Like, when I get the weapon locked and loaded on me? I did have to deal with that three times, that kind of stuff. I don't remember being scared. If I'm scared I'm too focused. When that stuff happens, you just, you're focused right here. That's what's important. "I want to get through this damn thing." So you don't become self-reflective. You can't look back at yourself. You got to focus on the danger. It was insane.
The place was crazy, and maybe I was a little crazy, I don't know. Most Vietnam vets have never seen a movie that they thought depicted what was theirs. I understand that. I mean most of these—they were kids. Some of them hadn't graduated from high school. They had no sense of metaphor. So the metaphor of the movie would throw them, but to me "Apocalypse Now" is what it was all about. I'd been at the bridge scene and it's nuts. There's a craziness to it.
In Vietnam there was a real craziness. The Army at that point had lost control of us. Discipline had broken down in that sense. Officers were scared of the enlisted men. How much fragging of officers went on, I have no idea, but it was talked about a lot. I did the best I could to have fun and get through the damn thing. And it was nuts. You see things that were…the bridge scene. Who's in charge? Nobody.

Interviewer
Did you treat officers?

Jeffrey Harris
No. That's where they would stop. Chicken shits. They were chicken shit to allow—they wouldn't allow me to treat the officers.

Interviewer
Who?

Jeffrey Harris
Major Mac. They'd take care of the officers. Generally we didn't get them in. I only remember this one guy coming in. He was a lieutenant. And he was there and Major Mac comes up to me and he says, "We want you to take this guy back to Chu Lai, so I'm going to hitch a ride on a chopper, get him on it and take him back to the psychiatrist back in Chu Lai." I said, "What's going on?"
And he hemmed and hawed and I talked to the guy for a minute and I went back and he wasn't going to tell me what was going on. And I says, "I'm going to tell you what went on." And Major Mac says, "Oh, what?" I says, "The guy was on R&R, probably in Japan, he had a homosexual experience and now he's having a breakdown." Major Mac goes, "Okay, go on." I pegged it. I pegged it. And I took him back to Chu Lai and turned him over to the psychiatrist over there.

Interviewer
You diagnose almost intuitively.

Jeffrey Harris
I am good at it. That's why Major Mac finally came to trust me after that. I was trusted. I was good at it. I am good at it. I listen. I make a good interviewer.

Interviewer
So you come from a western state to Vietnam, can you describe what Vietnam was to you?

Jeffrey Harris
Vietnam has the most beautiful beaches of any place in the world. I went on R&R in Hawaii and met my wife there and I went down to Waikiki beach and I said, "Where's the beach?"
When I was in Chu Lai there was a little island off, just barely off from the beach and it was off-limits to soldiers to go out on this island, but I went out with the dentist. I used to do this when I was up forward, too. The doctors would

go to treat somebody, or dentist goes out someplace and I'd jump in the jeep and go with them. So I went with the dentist out there. He was going to go out and work with the kids and the people out on the island, on their teeth. And I went out there. Beautiful kids all over the place. Mama-sans with red teeth from all the betel nut they chew. And anyway, the beach on that island must have been 150 yards of pure white sand. Just gigantic. The beaches are beautiful. The South China Sea and where the rivers come in—a lot of it I saw from the air in choppers. To me that countryside along the South China Sea is quite beautiful, especially in choppers. They take us way up at times and dip us over it. And then other times we'd get down in the—you know what contour flying is?

Interviewer

Explain it.

Jeffrey Harris

Contour flying is a chopper will get down at tree height, or as low as he can get, fence height, whatever. And the thing on it is, Hueys do about 140 knots, I think, and if it's 140 knots at tree line, by the time anybody recognizes that the chopper's coming and gets ready to shoot at it, it's gone. But if you get up high, you're in danger because they can see you coming and they've got time to get out their .50 calibers and start shooting at you, .30 calibers, whatever they got, start shooting at you.

So they fly contour. And it's roller coaster, I loved it. It's like riding a roller coaster. If you like, you could sit down and knock the hat off people on Highway 1 and go up Highway 1 and it's just crowded. Just crowded with little trucks and these little busses with people hanging on them, bicycles. Highway 1 was kind of a trip. I used to enjoy going up and down it with choppers, or driving it. I've driven it a few times.

Interviewer

Did you ever get into Saigon?

Jeffrey Harris

No, I never got down out of I Corps other than Cam Ranh Bay, when I flew out. I was all up north.

Interviewer

We had a guy in here talking about a friend of his who got an STD called "black gunk" that was untreatable, and they sent him off to live on an island with lepers.

Jeffrey Harris

I would know nothing about that.

Interviewer

Didn't we have a guy tell us that they may have told them a big fish story to keep them out of whorehouses?

Jeffrey Harris

Some people told terrible lies like the prostitutes put razor blades in their pussy and you're going to get your dick cut off and that sort of stuff. I went with some guys and went to one place with prostitutes and I was not interested. It was too dirty, I didn't get turned on by it. But we were out in the field. Saigon, that would have been another story. There was money and there was highfaluting girls but I never got into those areas.

Interviewer

What year were you there?

Jeffrey Harris

'67, '68.

Interviewer

Those are big turbulent years.

Jeffrey Harris

Yeah.

Interviewer

Are you aware of what's going on back home?

Jeffrey Harris

Oh yeah. Well, yes and no. Martin Luther King got killed while I was there and Bobby Kennedy. Anyway, it gave you that sense of maybe, “This place isn't as bad as we think.” I mean it was a sense that—but there really was this thing of "the world." That's the world. That's another place. And that we'd be okay. The worst advice that I gave all the time I was there is that when we get out of here we'll go back to the world and we'll get back into the life we had and we'll be okay. We'll just leave this behind us. That turned out to be quite false.

A friend of mine put it quite nicely when I came back. He's been a friend from college before, a good friend. And he says, "Jeff, when you went to Vietnam we thought it was a little like when you're watching a movie on television and they come to a commercial, you have a commercial break, and then when the commercial's over it goes back to the movie?" He says, "We thought you were on a commercial break." I thought that put it really quite clearly of what people thought. And what we thought. It's like a business trip. We'll do the business trip and then we'll go back to what we were doing. But it didn't work that way.

Interviewer
Was it that way for you? This idea that you'd come back to the world?

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah. I believed that we would --

Interviewer
But when you came home, did it work for you?

Jeffrey Harris
Oh, hell no. Oh, no. No, it was a different world. It all looked different. I was very morose. Like I said, I'd been living with blacks. I never got into the handshake. I'm not trying to be black. I'm a white guy living with the black guys. But I picked up all the lingo and was talking black and my wife at the time says, "Who in the hell's this? What's he doing?" And I was very morose and I was distant.

Had a lot of rage reactions, a lot of anger about stuff. I didn't get treated bad. I started back at the U for what was, back then, spring quarter. I started spring quarter at the U. No, winter quarter. Yeah, the winter quarter in January. I got into the psych department, counseling psych at the U. But nobody really bothered me. Guys talk about getting spit on or treated badly when we came back from Vietnam. I think I looked bad; nobody particularly wanted to mess with me. I went up to the U.

Interviewer
Did you have any close friends there?

Jeffrey Harris
Doc Eason, my best friend. But I lost all contact. I met some of the guys. We'd been together back in Fort Hood and I knew 'em out in the field, and when we got over there. But we met in Cam Ranh because we were all flying out together and they said let's trade names and stuff. And I said no, this is over with. So I have no idea what happened to him. I'm sorry I did that. But that's what I did. Yeah, I thought it was over with.

Interviewer
So you've had years to study the war. What were your ideas and thoughts when you returned, and now.

Jeffrey Harris
Well, I marched once against the war when I got back. It was a major march from right out here by what used to be the golf course all the way down to the federal building. And I think it was probably the biggest one they did. I had my field jacket on so I looked Army, so guys would talk to me. And they'd come to me, “Oh, you were in Vietnam?” and I'd say, “Yeah.” “You're against the war?” And I'd say, “Yeah.” And he'd say, “Oh, it's because it's an economic war?” I'd say, “What?” I don't know. Or, you know, “it's a racial war.” I'd say, “Oh fuck you.”

I think some guy finally asked me and I told him. He says, “Well why are you against the war?” I says, “When I was in this medical unit, we had this medical unit where we had a little hospital built out of ammo boxes filled with sand and had a plywood roof on it. And we would go up there, we had stretchers up there, and we'd go up there sometimes at night and watch the war. And it was kind of fun watching the war out there, the choppers up in the air drawing fire, and fire going down and flares and all that going on.”

I says, “Problem was, we'd sit up there and get stoned, drink too much beer, go to sleep. And if you went to sleep on top of our hospital, if you want to call it that, the problem was, in the morning the choppers would come in and the choppers that came in in the morning were carrying dead. They carried the dead. And they'd see you up on the roof, and they'd holler and we had to get down off there and carry dead over to graves registration.” I says, “That's why I'm against the war. I didn't like carrying dead people.”

And that was too particular for him. These guys marching against the war wanted to keep it on a good intellectual plane. No, I don't like dead bodies of young men that look so Goddamned handsome and healthy.

I never felt good about Desert Storm that Bush did. Although I thought if he did it, he ought have gone all the way. That was kind of chicken shit. If you're going to do it, do it all. But I never felt good about that. So I've never felt good about Iraq or Afghanistan. I'm kind of with Colin Powell, if you broke it, you own it. So we got stuck in this thing. I wish I would have had—I'd have gone there. If I were younger I'd go down and say I want to go. I'd go to Afghanistan as a psychologist. I would do it now. But I don't have the health to do that anymore. But I would do it.

Interviewer
Why would you do that?

Jeffrey Harris
Because I'm good at what I do. And I empathize with people in war. It wasn't like I had patients or clients that were healthy people. It was like they were all my clients. I was responsible for all of these guys. And I would go, yeah, in fact, maybe I could have done it when they did Desert Storm, but I was trying to get the private practice going and didn't do it. But I wish I had gone down and seen if I could. There was a medical unit that was going, although it ended up in Germany. That would have been a letdown. But, yeah, I'd have gone even though I don't agree in the war. So, yes you can support the troops and not believe in the war. Contrary to O'Reilly.

Interviewer
Can you talk about PTSD? We've interviewed a lot of guys that we knew had it, and this was a really hard project for us because of the tragedy we keep coming across --

Jeffrey Harris
I'm going to tell you one more story before we do that. It fits in with why some of them don't talk. I'll tell you two stories. One is the year after I came back from Vietnam. I was in a fraternity down at Utah State so I knew all those guys and they had a party and I went down to their party. And I'd been back six, nine months, something like that. And none of these guys had gone to Vietnam. They were all college deferments, except one. And he was a little younger than I but I knew his brother well and I knew him, too.

But we get into the party and it's a cocktail party and everybody's dressed nice and clinking glasses and the nice things you do. Telling old stories about fraternity brothers kind of crap. And this younger guy comes to me and he says, “I want to tell them something I did.” I said, “Well, what was it?” And he says, well he ended up being one of those quickie E-6's, he was a sergeant in Vietnam field. And they got into a really bad firefight and he had captured a guy. He'd captured a Vietnamese and he had the guy there under gun. But they were under fire and they had to get the hell out of there and the chopper was coming in so he had a choice to leave the guy there or shoot him. So he executed the guy, he shot him. He said he wanted to tell these guys that.

I says, “No, don't.” I says, “They are not going to understand this. They're not going to understand it. They just won't.” I says, “You should tell people. Tell people who you know and trust, don't tell this to just anybody because they won't.” That kid's probably still got the guilt over that. What'd he do? He executed a man.

There was another kid when I was out in the field, Camp Baldy at this time, who had come in for some physical reason, I wasn't sure what it was, but he was hanging around. But the thing that was really apparent is how angry he was. I mean he'd turned into a real racist with the Vietnamese. And we had Vietnamese that would come in and get treated for certain things, so we had some of them and we'd get a family. The way they did things, if a kid came in, the whole family comes in. So we'd have Vietnamese around there that the doctors were taking care of some kid for something. And he was just really racist and just angry and talking bad.

And I went back, I looked out and I saw him and he's got a little Vietnamese boy by his hand and they're walking together hand in hand. And it scared me. I thought, “What in the hell's he doing? What is he doing?” And I let him go. I watched him, and when he came out, I says, “What are you doing?” He says, “Well, I took the kid to the bathroom.” This is out of character. I get talking to him more, and I says, “What's been going on with you?” I says, “What happened?”

Well he'd come over with a friend, a guy that he'd been with back, I think since basic training. This didn't happen that often in Nam. That didn't happen that often because people got all split and went different directions. But this has become a buddy. This is his good buddy and they're both in the same infantry squad. And they're walking across the rice paddy one day and there's one shot, one sniper shot, catches his friend right through the forehead and his friend goes down. That's it. That's it. Nothing else. Shortly after that he's walking with his sergeant down a road and an old papa-san is coming the other way with his cone hats and just an older guy. And the kid has a grenade launcher so he's also got a .45, and as the papa-san's coming up close, he pulls his .45 and shoots the papa-san in the head. Done. There it is.

You going to get this kid to talk? I don't know. They'll tell me. I get stories. But they won't tell their kids. PTSD? I hadn't expected it. Obviously I had some when I got back. I'd wake up scared in the morning, have rages, and I wasn't even in any traumatic situations. But I had some of it. What did they give me? They gave me ten percent so I get 30 percent in disability up at the VA which I like because it gives me access to the hospital and I want that. It's a good program. Where was I?

Interviewer
Does the sound of helicopter blades bring back anything?

Jeffrey Harris
Yes. Give me the chills. People have different reactions to that. Talking to one good buddy last night, I was trying to talk him into coming in and talking to you. And we got talking about that and he says he loved getting on choppers, he just hated jumping out of them. Because that meant danger. And I can tell a Huey immediately, just by the sound. And it used to give me chills because it would give me that ohh, déjà vu kind of a feel. But I loved flying in choppers. That was Lagoon.

Interviewer
But still that sound --

Jeffrey Harris
I know the Huey sound, yeah.

Interviewer
It has that triggering effect.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah, it will give me chills. A lot of guys love the sound because it meant that they were coming to get them out of the field. I've heard them say that.

Interviewer
Some people think of it as the sound of rescue.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah.

Interviewer
Others say, “Oh God, it's happening again.”

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah. Yeah. But I got that feeling one other way, too, when I was in -- It sounds like something artillery guys would get.

Interviewer
On April 30, 1975, most of us saw on television, the Fall of Saigon. What were you doing, what were you thinking?

Jeffrey Harris
Just upset. No name to it, no sense to it, just upset. Just everything. Glad we're out of there. God, what a way to go. Just brings back the whole craziness of 50,000 body bags. A lot of dead people. A lot of dead kids for nothing.

Interviewer
Tell people what graves registration is.

Jeffrey Harris
Oh, my poem?

Interviewer
You have a poem?

Jeffrey Harris
That was my poem.

Interviewer
Oh, please tell us.

Jeffrey Harris
Okay. It's titled "Graves Registration", which is a military morgue.

‘‘I saw him only yesterday before his .45 with a minuscule force of his index finger blew brains and blood around a neat hole in the plywood wall.
I saw him there today with hair combed down and face intact, still I did not know him.
A young boy lay near with an almost smile, appearing nearly alive, but for his bloodless eyes and his lack of legs.
God knows where he left them.
I thought as I drank a cold beer from the cooler meant to preserve the flesh, body bags, ham sandwiches
Of that dog I remember, that auto maimed dog lying howling on the asphalt,
Whose pain and fear and anger I ended with a bludgeoning axe,
A bludgeoning axe to ease my own hurt.
I saw life in his misery but where the hell is death?
Even the Army can have a poetic sense.
Graves can be counted.
Even the Army can have it" -- Oh damn it. I got lost in it that time.
Yeah. Okay.
"That dog I remember.
That auto maimed dog lying howling on the asphalt whose pain and fear and anger I ended with a bludgeoning axe, a bludgeoning axe to ease my own hurt.
All that's left is meat, grave markers, and body bags.
Fields and green fields of markers.
Even the Army can have a poetic sense.
Graves can be counted but death, death will not register."

Part II

Interviewer
Talk about the media in Vietnam. Did you know about media that was bringing news home or were you just an Armed Forces Radio kind of guy?

Jeffrey Harris
Well especially when we were in the place Camp Baldy, which that was the last camp that I was in, it was Camp

Baldy. We had television there. So we'd watch – what was the one with Goldie Hawn in? Used to watch that one. Rowan Martin. "Laugh-In." Yeah, we'd get that kind of stuff. So I remember "Laugh-In." No, we really didn't have much media coverage, we didn't know what was all going on. That was '68 and so we were there kind of early. So that was when the media was starting to show the body bags coming back and things like that. But we had no idea what the people in the United States were saying.
You know, we learned about things. Like I knew when Martin Luther King was shot, killed. And those were very disturbing, when King was killed and when Robert Kennedy was killed. Those were very disturbing to us because we thought, "We're in this war and we get this over this and then we'll go back to the world, you know? Go back to the life we were living before," naively, we thought. But when those happened it gave us sense that the whole world kind of a thing. And gave us some sense of what was going on in the United States. But we weren't getting the coverage of the people protesting or that.

Interviewer
What was the reaction when you heard of these assassinations?

Jeffrey Harris
I don't remember that we really talked about it that much. It just happened and I don't remember talking about it that much.

Interviewer
Do you remember journalists or cameramen?

Jeffrey Harris
They didn't come and see us.

Interviewer
Talk about after Tet, you were asked to go to Hue. Why did you want out of your unit and did you go to Hue?

Jeffrey Harris
Went through Hue. Didn't I tell you the whole story on the trouble I got in?*(laughs)* And that I wasn't planting palm trees?

Interviewer
Yes, you did.

Jeffrey Harris
But that was the whole thing, was, I'd been under all this pressure to go out and plant palm trees and to conform. And I put myself in the box. I mean sooner or later they were gonna get me. But also, looking back on it, I really was the most qualified to do what they wanted to do. I'd handled other things that – I'd ended up handling other things. Like the psychiatrist, Major Casper had left for a week or two for some damn thing and we had a major there who was supposed to be over the clinic there in Chu Lai who he was a social worker.
And I'm trying to remember his name, but when Major Casper was still there working, we'd had a young man come in that was a Seabee, do you know what Seabees are? Yeah, he was a Seabee who was very – truly manic-depressive, okay, truly bipolar. I mean he could just get totally elated and off the wall and also psychotic, delusional. He'd shot up the laundry there. They were scared to death of him and they sent him to us. And we decided we'd just ship him out-of-country, send him out-of-country. So Major Casper had got everything set up, and I took him over to a plane and watched him get on the plane and I took off. Turns out that he'd just walked off the plane. And so he didn't leave country. He went over and stole and jeep and went back to his unit and they were scared of him.

Interviewer
So you walked him to the plane.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah, I got him over to the plane, fly him out.

Interviewer
And he never got on it?

Jeffrey Harris
No. I don't think he ever got on it, or if he did get on it, he walked right back off. I thought he was gone, but all of the sudden he shows up at the clinic again. And it was kind of a little bit of a scary afternoon. We had this quantum kind of a hut thing set up for our clinic, which is basically, you know, some plywood with some screens and a tin roof in a little cubicle set off by plywood. And we had a little place there where I'd go in and kept files and I'd do the typing and stuff like that. And the three of us, myself and two other social workers – or what were we? Psychology social work specialists like myself. Three of us were standing back there and he'd come in.
So we had him in the clinic and we're deciding what to do. And at this time Major Casper's gone, so the major's over the clinic. And we're there and, at that time, you know, everybody carried M-16s, everybody had a weapon. And we're sitting where we can't see. His name was France, if I remember his name, his name was France. And France is back in this little waiting area kind of thing, and we hear an M-16 lock and load. And so we know

– *(laughs)* so France has got an M-16, he's locked and loaded, he's been shooting up all kinds of stuff, he's delusional as hell, and I said to the other two, we're kind of half laughing about the whole thing, says, "You know, we gotta go get that gun off from him, we gotta go get that weapon." And everybody's kind of looking dumbfounded, you know, “who's gonna go do this?” And I finally said, "I'll go get it."
And I walked out there and France has got that M-16 locked and loaded and I just walked up to him and I said, "Give me that, France, please," and he handed it to me. *(laughs)* But what was interesting, at that point, the major didn't know what the hell to do. You know, we've got him there, he doesn't know what to do, so I just took charge and I went and talked to the other doctors, did a whole thing, got him back on medication, wrote up orders to get him shipped out again and took care of the whole thing. And this time I made sure I watched the plane fly off, that I got France out of there. Why am I telling this story?*(laughs)*

Interviewer
You basically made that judgment call.

Jeffrey Harris
I remember why I'm telling that story, because I'd said I was really the most qualified to independently go out into the field units.

Interviewer
Acute situational reaction is what you called –

Jeffrey Harris
That's what they called it back then, that was in the old DSM-2 or whatever, the diagnostic manual. There's a diagnostic manual, DSM-4, that was I think the DSM-2 back there.

Interviewer
Can you say that again?

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah, that's what it was labeled, acute situational reaction.

Interviewer
Clearly France had a mental illness before he came to Vietnam. Don't they do a psychological test before they're brought into the service?

Jeffrey Harris
No, you ended up with psychotics. We had a number of psychotics. Especially when I was in Chu Lai we had the psychotics. Or stress exacerbates any of those problems, and that was back when – in 1966 was a major call up in the service, in terms of drafts. They were flooded with draftees. And so I'm not sure how careful or how much they noted. So I don't know what would happen.

Interviewer
Can you describe Hue before and after it was decimated?

Jeffrey Harris
No, not really. We went through it on a convoy. So I got to see the buildings.

Jeffrey Harris
This was after the siege. But it was about that time when they'd pretty well cleaned... the Americans had control of it again.

Interviewer
Could you describe the temples and buildings that were destroyed?

Jeffrey Harris
The things I saw as we went through in the trucks. Basically all I say, a city that was like nothing else I'd seen in Vietnam. I mean you could tell that. It looked like a European city and it's reminiscent of the movie, the stuff I'd seen about Europe after when they went in after the bombing of the European cities. It was reminiscent of that. It was a very different kind of experience because you had these very modern – you had both modern and old. The French décor of the place. Obviously, you know, where bombs had hit, and buildings, big holes in the building from artillery, that sort of thing. So that, basically, that was my experience, that was just to see – it's a city I would love to go see because it looked like it was obviously a very beautiful city. So that was my experience of it. So I didn't have the experience of the "Full Metal Jacket" guys. You knew that's where that was –

Interviewer
I didn't.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah, "Full Metal Jacket" was Hue, that was about Hue.

Interviewer
Talk about the chaos of Vietnam in your experience.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah... when I have talked about it as a break-down in discipline... you had all of these draftees. And like we didn't wear our – you've got pictures of me with my shirt off or you know, no hat. So we weren't dressing according to Army regulations and we weren't pressed to do that. There was a break down I think also in terms of respect for officers. I remember telling the first sergeant who had come out and said that I was out of uniform and I told him, "Fuck off." And I said, "Fuck off. I'm with the 198th Infantry Brigade, call my first sergeant if you want to bitch at me," and then walked away.
And that would not happen in today's army – and I don't think it happened in previous armies – that you could do that kind of thing. I looked bad, I was coming out of the field and going into Chu Lai and some first sergeant who I don't think had been there that long, you know, approaches me and starts chastising me. And you didn't look all that, like – I mean, you're carrying a weapon, you don't look like somebody you'd want to mess with. I think. But it was that kind of a thing. But that was my sense of it, just in terms of chaos, in terms of well organized it was up above, I have no sense of that.
Interviewer
Why wasn't there a respect for officers and observing the rules?
Jeffrey Harris
Like I said, you had a lot of draftees.
Interviewer
And they didn't want to be there?
Jeffrey Harris
Yeah. They didn't volunteer. Well, a lot of them had volunteered, but they didn't know what they were volunteering for, and furthermore, they were gonna be drafted anyway so they'd go volunteer. So you had a big contingency of blacks who would go airborne, volunteer and become airborne. So nobody knew exactly what they were getting into, but there was a craziness. When we left Chu Lai, I think I told you that I went by ship to Vietnam. But we had to take a train from Texas to San Francisco, I forget the name of the base that's over there.
But guys, the night before we got on the train to go to San Francisco, guys went nuts, you know? They were tipping over cars, they were drinking, it was a craziness, fear. And the same experience, we went by ship and we got kind of a half a day, a day and a night of leave in Subic Bay in the Philippines and we all got nuts, you know? We didn't get to go into Manila, it was all on the base. But there were prostitutes on the base, there were plenty of places to drink, there was people – when some major rounded me up the next morning and kind of escorted me back to the ship – I think I was probably still drunk – the big guys were getting on the ship, it was like a scene out of "Mister Roberts" with the guys who'd traded their Army uniforms for some prostitute's dress. Guys dressed in dresses, it was just nuts.
And talk about sick. And then you get back on this ship and people were getting sick and hangovers. But it's that kind of... I mean we had three ships full of, you know. The whole 198th Infantry Brigade was going to Vietnam and we had no idea what was in store for us other than it's a war and it was very early in the war, so we had no idea what it was going to be like. And I remember when we pulled into the harbor in Da Nang, the smell of Vietnam. Because if you've been out to sea you can smell land. And it was like mulch, it was like the smelling of mulch pile full of grass that's going rotten kind of a smell. A sour-sweet smell.
Interviewer
Talk about trauma and treatment in Vietnam and your role as God in determining who stays and who goes.
Jeffrey Harris
What you would call “acute situational reaction” is not PTSD. They didn't have that term back then anyway. But there is a term, and I can't remember by DSM-4 well enough, but there is a term for someone who has been into something that may later cause PTSD but some sort of really traumatic thing. You were there. Well it could be a car accident. But we're talking about something much more stressful than just a car accident.
You've got something where your buddies have been shot and killed while you're standing next to them. People who ended up in a bunker when they're overran, okay? The NVA's overrun and they bring in napalm and they napalm you, I mean they bomb you because you're overrun and that's the only thing to do. So you've got people coming out of very serious situations who have survived it physically. And their reaction is more childlike: crying, confused – sometimes silent, but generally very vocal. They're complaining. "I can't do this, I don't want to go back into that," and very distressed. I'm not sure much more I can explain than that.
Interviewer
So you're describing when they're coming back to you traumatized. And what is the treatment?
Jeffrey Harris
Well, at that time the notions of how to treat them medically had a lot to do with the way we – you had different names for this kind of a disorder, you know? The First World War it was shell-shock, that kind of thing. And quite often, people that had it were immediately taken out and sent to hospitals and taken out of the duty, taken out of the

danger, in essence. And the belief at that time was that was not the right treatment. That this was a situational thing and you needed to get them through it. And it's sort of like, “you fell off the horse, get back on.” So the notion was – because a lot of these others ended up hospitalized the rest of their lives, that they were doing during the Korean War, Second World War. So the notion was, we don't want them hospitalized, so you wanted to send them back to duty, you wanted to send them back to their unit.
And I'd developed my own way of doing that. And I agreed with it for a number of reasons, I agreed that it was the proper therapy. But it had to do with people my age were all brought up with playing Cowboys and Indians and John Wayne, and all these notions of courage and honor. And that if you said, "Okay, you're unable to do this, there's something wrong with you, you're characterlogically different, and you're weak,” to take them out was making that statement to them. So that was part of my own sense of why I was able to say, "Okay, you're going back." Another one was, I really didn't have training to be doing what I was doing. I'd had a year of graduate school running rats around mazes and never got the Army training that most of these social work psychology specialists had gotten. So I had my own way of dealing with it.
One was, like a lot of people back in the early '60s, a lot of young people that got into studying a little existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre and that sort of thing. And I had a very existential notion about it all, and of personal responsibility and that we have to make choices. So my way of dealing was to put the choice back on them, that they had to make a choice. That I was not going to declare them psychologically unable to be soldiers, and that they would need to make choices of what they were going to do.
And they'd say, "Well, I can't go back out there." And I said, "Well don't go, refuse to go." "Well, if I do that, I'll end up at the stockade." And I said, "Maybe. I don't know, it's a lot of possibilities, you might end up folding blankets someplace, I don't know what will happen if you refuse, but that's your choice. You can refuse, or you can decide to go back."
I'm very practical too. I'm very practical. These guys were coming out of very bad situations. I remember one of 'em where I got four young men in, who, by the way, from when I was in Chu Lai and I was still a rifleman, I knew the person that they were talking about. But he was sort of a hero. So we had this squad in which there was one guy in there, was a leader and a hero and was really respected by the other people in the squad. And they ended up in a firefight and I ended up with four of them coming in on the same chopper as acute situational, they'd broken down. And it was interesting, because the reason they'd broken down is because their hero had been shot. And without him, all of the sudden they felt lost. So what do you do at that point? It turned out later that he was okay, by the way. He'd been wounded but he wasn't – in fact he was still back with his unit.
And it's interesting, there were four of 'em, but, I didn't know, but one of them was the individuals that was part of that squad, he was a young black man. And all of the sudden I noticed that he was just sitting there, not talking, not doing anything. Went over and talked to him and he was shook. I, shook, I mean, he was obviously confused and agitated, but he said, "I want to go back." He said, "I've got to go back, I've got to go back to my unit. I've got to get back to my unit." And I said, "Okay, we'll do that." But part of my treatment at that time was actually very practical. I would talk to them and we'd talk about the notion that I'm not going to relieve you of duty as a soldier. And basically saying there's nothing psychiatrically really wrong with you. You've been in a bad situation and this reaction that you're having is actually normal. Who in the hell wouldn't?

Interviewer

Would you do the same thing today?

Jeffrey Harris

But I'd work out a deal with them, okay? The guy would say, "Okay, I can't go back." I'd say, "When can you go back? How much time do you need?" And I would work towards them making a commitment and I would shake hands. So it was their commitment, they'd made the decision to go back. And at that point, before I'd gotten in there, the MDs, they didn't know what to do with them all, and they'd shoot 'em full of Thorazine. And Thorazine would just knock 'em out and Thorazine gives a big hangover, it was a terrible drug to use with them. But there was a commanding officer there, another doctor told me another medication that I ended up using that was just basically some sedatives, some light sedatives.
And what I would do at that point is, I would order them. "The thing that you're gonna do now is you're gonna go over to that shower, I'm get you a whole new uniform, I'm gonna get you clean fatigues, all of this. We're gonna get you cleaned up." They would take this lighter medication, important to sleep. Get 'em some sleep. And that they could have like, two, three days, we'd make some kind of deal before they had to go back to their unit. So I'd let them settle for a couple, three days. And I told them I don't want to see you moping around, I want to see you – you know, we'd get movies there occasionally and there was beer. And I says, you know, “Take a break. Take a stand down. Drink some beer, listen to some music, watch a movie and then go back.” So I'd work out a deal with them. To this day, I have misgivings, “Was it the right thing to do?”

Interviewer

Tell me about that. Do you think you did the right thing?

Jeffrey Harris
Well, I'm feeling guilt about what I did because I was also doing the same thing with myself. I've got to make a decision and I'd had to, at a couple of points in there where I had to make a decision, was I gonna do this or not? Was I gonna take responsibility for these people? And I always had a sense, by the way, that it wasn't that I had patients coming in, it was that they were all my patients, the ones that weren't coming in. We were all in this together. Misgivings? You know, were these the ones that ended up with PTSD later? I don't know. Did they die? Did some of them die? I don't know. I would assume some of them did. Was it the right thing to do? I don't know. The way PTSD is treated now, and I've read some psychiatric stuff that would agree with me, is there's a lot we're doing wrong now, because there is a sense in which – and I still do this – I'm not big on hospitalizing people or taking people out of their active life: "Okay, you're depressed, we're going to put you in a hospital for a month." I'm more for keeping people engaged in the life that they've got and dealing with the problems that they've got outside, in non-hospital situations. So that's always stuck with me, I still follow that kind of a thing, you know?
I can come across, I guess, as somewhat mean to some people. Although most people that know me, and I'd say my clients never see me as mean 'cause it's your choice. No. I was going to say that some of the problems that I have with PTSD now is, they come back and they put them on 100 percent PTSD, 100 percent disability. And I'm not sure of all the variations and that sort of stuff, but if you're 100 percent, you cannot work. No. If you go out in work then you're not 100 percent disabled.
And by the way, social security disability works the same way. If you've got this disability, you can't work. And I think that's a terrible way to handle it, is that all of the sudden, we've got to get them back engaged in life. So what are they gonna do if they can't work? Go to the bar and drink? What else do you got to do, you know? And I would change that kind of stuff and hold people more responsible for adapting. I'm not sure that that's being done. So part of me is I think in many ways I did the right thing. But people are dying, so...

Interviewer
Some have said their PTSD was a result of their experiences and partly brought forward by the American reaction to them when they returned. I want your thoughts on that.

Jeffrey Harris
I wouldn't agree with that. There was that sense of not coming home. Nobody ever bothered me. I was never confronted by somebody for being a baby killer. Drug-crazed baby killer, that's what some of the protesters would call us. They weren't merely anti-war, they ended up being anti-soldier and that was quite prevalent. No one ever bothered me but I have a suspicion that's because I kind of didn't look like someone you'd want to bother. *(laughs)* And I wore my field jacket after I'd got back. I had a field jacket and I would wear that to school. I ended up back at the University of Utah. Within six months after I got back, I was in school, in graduate school.
But the notion of – I'll give you my reaction is something. I think it was in '74, 1974 that the POW's were released by the North Vietnamese. And this is appropriate right now because there's this big argument should we have a ticker-tape parade. Well the POW's were released and they ended up doing a ticker-tape parade in New York City. And I was sitting, watching it on television with my wife at the time, my ex-wife, and it might have been even the first times that I started crying. I was sitting there watching it and I started crying. And my wife thought that my reaction was one of feeling good, you know? They've come home, you know? I'm crying because I'm happy for them.
I was not unhappy for them, I was glad that they were released, but I was angry. I was crying because I was so goddamned angry. And my anger came as, why not us? We want to come home. I want to come home too. And there was that sense that we never got to come home. Yeah, the cure for any mental disorder, in some ways, is getting back into life, to developing social support structures, to have organization in your life, to be able to pay your bills, to be able to, you know, to have friends. Isolation will kill ya. You have to get back into life. And that resentment of the Vietnam vet was an obstruction to them getting back into life. So yes, that would increase, that would make it much more difficult for them to deal with the fears that they brought back. It isn't the memories you brought back, it's the whole war, it's that whole way of reacting to things. Car backfires and you go spread eagle, that kind of stuff.

Interviewer
We've heard many of those stories.

Jeffrey Harris
Yeah, did I tell you about mine going spread eagle one day? *(laughs)* Anyway, okay, it's the summer when I got back and I had some really close friends that I'd golfed with before, they were my really good buddies from way back in college. And we were out golfing over in North Salt Lake over on the golf course. And that golf course, the far ends of it at that time get out to where the oil refineries are, and so there's lots of open fields and fences and things like that. And I was on a green getting ready to putt way out there.
And there was this man and his son who had one of those model rockets. And I'm getting ready to putt, and I hadn't noticed them out there, and I'm getting ready to putt and they shoot off this rocket. And I just went whaw! *(laughs)* I just spread eagle on the green. And the other guys weren't even – it wasn't anything that they reacted to. They turned their head or whatever, but I'm spread eagle on the green like this. And my friends turn to me and says,

"What are you doing, Jeff?" And I says, "Lining up my putt." *(laughs)*

Interviewer

Was there a turning point in the war for you, where you wanted out desperately?

Jeffrey Harris

No, I never wanted out desperately, I just planned on getting out. There was no epiphany, there was no big turning point, but I increasingly became more aware of what was going on, on a micro level. And I like to say that Walter Cronkite and I came to the same conclusion at the same time that was, the war was unwinnable. So that was fairly early in my experience there. So this was an absurd situation, because we weren't gonna win it, I never felt we were gonna win it. So I was always against the war, and for the soldiers, by the way. These people that say you can't be against the war and supporting the troop, my whole being was supporting these guys. I just knew I was gonna – well, if I didn't get killed, but you didn't think about that. You know, I was planning on going back.

And I, like a lot of people, I think probably had some misgivings about going back. Well, fears about going back. "What's it going to be like?" But of leaving behind these soldiers. And before I went back, they sent a guy out that was gonna take my place, out in the forward clearing stage in the medical unit, and I didn't think he could handle much of anything, I felt kind of bad leaving people. And recognized, it was a stupid way to fight a war. It's a stupid way to fight a war. You send people out for a year, year and a half, and then release 'em when they finally start to get good at what they do. *(laughs)* And bring somebody in that doesn't know what's going on is a stupid way to fight a war. And it was really stupid that they would send me back when I'd become confident – I wouldn't say I was good at what I did, because I have no idea what criterion one would use to decide that, but I was confident, I felt confident in what I was doing.

Interviewer

Describe building a hospital out of ammo boxes.

Jeffrey Harris

I've got some pictures from inside of it.

Interviewer

Did you just make what you could with what you have?

Jeffrey Harris

No, it's a very sensible design. The ammo boxes, it's like big bricks. And you fill them full of sand because that's protective. It has some protection and it would protect you from mortars for example, wouldn't do much for some other weapons, but mortars, so it gives you some protection. It's like kids building a snow fort, that's basically it. You build it but you're building it out of – ammo would come in boxes probably three feet by eighteen inches, maybe. Fill those full of sand, stack 'em up, put a roof on it.

Interviewer

Can you describe the Vietnamese culture, and the people, and your connection to them?

Jeffrey Harris

I never really had that much contact. We had a hooch girl, they called her, call them, who came in, and we paid her to clean and she'd do our laundry and things like that. But I didn't speak any Vietnamese. There was a guy in there that protected her, that nobody got to have sex with her. That was common though in places where you could do it, where you had a Vietnamese come in. I'd get my hair cut by a Vietnamese barber. We'd go out and do that. For all we knew he was setting mines at night. *(laughs)* But we'd go in pairs and we had M-16s so we weren't too worried about getting our throats cut.

By the way, Vietnamese give great haircuts. They use a straight edge and we're hairy beasts to a lot of Asians, a lot of Chinese. I guess there's some very bigoted Chinese too, towards Europeans, that we're too hairy, barbarians. But they would take the straight razor and take even peach fuzz off up in here or do your ear. But I love getting shaved with a straight razor, I love the feel of it. Yeah, sitting there, the guy's got a straight razor. No real contact with the culture, I didn't learn anything really, about the culture. I was not in a position where some would be, where I could get into the Da Nang or the city itself and go buy meals. I was never in that kind of a situation. Saigon would've been a totally different experience, those people that were in Saigon.

Interviewer

What is your take away about the Vietnam War?

Jeffrey Harris

I tried to talk to a friend of mine into seeing you and you talked to him on the phone. And he wouldn't do it. And he has never told his family. They've got kids and grandkids but they won't tell them what they did. And I think they should. We need all of us to have more sense of what it's like to be in that kind of a situation. And a little less – what would I say... a little more doubt about our own strengths and weaknesses, a little more doubt. Less arrogance. People say, "Well I would never do that." *(laughs)*

You get in the situation, it's a whole new world, and a guy who would never shoot somebody in the back of the head, would never execute somebody, does. Gets into a situation, he's got a prisoner, choppers are coming he's

under fire, he's got to leave, what do you do with the prisoner? The guy shoots him and brings that home with him, because that's not him. And in that situation he does it. Or people say, “I couldn't do that.” You know, “I wouldn't be able to, I'd fold, I wouldn't have the courage to do that.” You've got no idea what you'll do.

I was watching television this morning on the stuff that's going on in Syria, and it was on CNN and they were talking to a guy who's hold up in a building there with the Syrian army troops moving in. They're killing civilians and they're bombing civilian homes, killing women and kids and killing everybody, anything that walks. And they've all decided in the belief that these people who are still there is that the army is moving in and they will kill them and they're going to die. And they already have decided that they're going to die. But this guy keeps getting on the – they were doing it with that Skype or whatever you do on – so they were talking back and forth and he's in a very, in a situation in which he believes he's going to be dead within the next day or two. But he's still operating, he's still functioning, he's still getting the message out, he's still alive and committed.

Can I do that? Could you do that? Who could do that? What are you going to do if you know you're going to be dead? Somebody's gonna come shoot ya in the next couple of days. Are you gonna go hide in the closet? Are you gonna break down and cry? Are you gonna be a hero? I don't know. Especially a lot of people, who have never been to war, who are right now talking about, “Let's go bomb Iran.” They've got no idea. They've got no idea.

So in some ways, war is a human experience. The first history written of man was about the ... Peloponnesian Wars? I forget, it was a Greek, but anyway. We've been having – wars are a human experience. And we need to make sure that our children have some knowledge of what that experience might be. And hopefully figure out not to do that. You don't want to go do that, you don't want to end up doing things that you're going to question yourself about the rest of your life and feel guilty about. You don't want to bring that home with you. But I think we in Vietnam talked about the world. We were in ‘Nam and there was the world and that was two different places. And when we went back to the world we'd leave Nam behind. So we'd leave all of what we did there behind. It would be done, be gone. But it doesn't. It doesn't go away. You have a new way of interpreting the world.

Interviewer

None of you even knew you'd carry this for the rest of your life.

Jeffrey Harris

No, that's what I'm saying, we believed that we'd go back to the world. I don't know whether I told you this, when a friend of mine had done the analogy, talking to him after I get back, talking to him, and he says, "Jeff, when you went to Vietnam," he said, and the analogy he used he says, "It's like when you're watching a movie on television and it has a break for an advertisement. So in the advertisement you go get some popcorn or get yourself a Coke and then go back and the movie comes back on after the advertisement, right where it left off." And he says, "We thought you were on, it was just like a business trip, it was an advertisement in your life. You'd come back and take off right where you left off." And I think we believed that in Vietnam. We believed that we could go back and get our car and our girlfriend and get married, get a job, all of that would be just another experience. But it didn't work that way. We weren't on a commercial break. *(laughs)*

Interviewer

How you were raised, your background, kind of determined how you came out of the war. Or is your experience that they came in with one idea and came out with another? I believe in this culture people are more patriotic?

Jeffrey Harris

Well, I didn't see much patriotism in Vietnam. I didn't see any patriotism in Vietnam. Well, can't say I didn't see any, but we weren't patriots. And well, one thing, what you're talking about is also is the diversity of people that we can't stereotype these people coming back. You know, “here's your typical Vietnam soldier.” It's very diverse, very different, as you say, backgrounds and very different structures to come into. Like one of them, the people I'd talked about, when the one would come in and talk to you, I see a number of Hispanics who really have survived pretty well, even though they do have PTSD, and I think it's that family, that the Hispanic families can really, they're extended, and really tight. And they come back to a really good support structure.

And you know, and some of the patriotism you're going to hear from some ones coming back is after-the-fact. We got to justify what we did. “I need to be able to justify to myself what I did.” So a lot of it can be rationalization, and by that I don't mean rationalizations, in sort of a dishonest way, or that that's bad, but we're all going to rationalize it, we're all going to try to figure out why we did what we did and make some sense out of it. And being a patriot is obviously one of them. Asking to be respected for what we did, I think we all would like that one.

Interviewer

I want people to understand that every soldier has a different viewpoint.

Jeffrey Harris

I would say that's just human. Plurality. “Don't stereotype us, we're a real mixed group.”

Interviewer

Do you want to recite your poem again?

Jeffrey Harris

Okay, the title of the poem is "Grave's Registration" which is the name of the morgues in the military, a military morgue.

"I saw him only yesterday before his .45 with a minuscule force of his index finger blew brains and blood around a neat hole in the plywood wall. I saw him there today with hair combed down and face intact. Still, I did not know him. A young boy lay near with an almost smile appearing nearly alive. But for his bloodless eyes and his lack of legs – God knows where he left them. I thought, as I drank a cold beer from the cooler meant to preserve the flesh, body bags, ham sandwiches. Of that dog I remember, that auto-maimed dog who lay howling on the asphalt whose pain and fear and anger I ended with a bludgeoning axe, a bludgeoning axe to ease my own hurt. I saw life in his misery but where the hell is death? All that's left is meat, body bags, grave markers, fields and green fields of white, strictly aligned markers. Even the army can have a poetic sense. Graves can be counted. Named, dressed and touched. But death, death will not register."