Dave Magee
Sergeant
U.S Marine Corp
Gunner/Crew Chief
Ogden, Utah
"Escalation"

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Dave Magee

David Lane Magee.

Interviewer

And you were born when?

Dave Magee

22 April, 1943.

Interviewer

And where were you born?

Dave Magee

Salt Lake.

Interviewer

Did you grow up here?

Dave Magee

Grew up, born and raised in Salt Lake basically 'til I was 17. Went in the Marine Corps.

Interviewer

What was your life like before the Marines, and why did you join the Marines?

Dave Magee

Well, let's see. I'd say mostly we were poor. And the reason I went in the Marine Corps was that my family, kinda the tradition was you stayed in school 'til you were 16, you quit when you were 16, went to work. Age of 17 you went into the military. I had five older brothers in the Navy. I was going in the Navy. And I went down to the recruiter in Salt Lake, 4th South and State. Went in and the recruiter was a 2nd class whatever sitting in a gray uniform. Supposed to be white, but it was kinda gray. He had worn it a few days. Said a couple things to him and I turned around and walked out. I was not gonna go in the Navy all of a sudden. Staff Sergeant Franklin walked into the recruiting area. As he walked by, the thought hit me that I'd had five brothers in the Navy. They all got out. Had a brother in-law in the Marine Corps and he stayed in. Turned around and followed him and went in the Marine Corps and went to boot camp and whatever.

Interviewer

Did you know what you wanted to do in the Marines?

Dave Magee

No. When I went in, again, Master Sergeant (Vakulan?)(02:01) who was the NCOIC, non-commissioned officer in charge of the recruiting station, because I tested fairly well, put me in guaranteed aviation. I didn't even know that until after I got into boot camp and was told I was guaranteed aviation. Went to Memphis, and then onto Jacksonville, Florida for aircraft electronics, electrical training.

Interviewer

Did anyone think they were gonna go to war in 1962?

Dave Magee

No. Not to my knowledge.

Interviewer

Were there questions or anything like that?

Dave Magee

Well, you always had the duck and cover and all that as we grew up, per se, that you knew that at one time or another eventually you were gonna have to go to war. But it was gonna be the nuclear holocaust. It wasn't gonna be just a war.

Interviewer

So you make it through training.

Dave Magee

Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer

And you're assigned to helicopter?

Dave Magee

Yes. This is a little bit different, too. I was assigned to a squadron called VMO, which is an observation squadron. Little helicopters and Cessna's at Camp Pendleton. And by then I'd known enough about Marine Corps aviation that there was no aviation at Camp Pendleton. Little tiny three Quonset huts and a nose dock was our entire maintenance area except for the tarmac. And it was kinda funny because aviation people were just nonexistent at Camp Pendleton so everywhere we went it was kinda they didn't treat us like real Marines. We were aviation, and then the real Marines were the grunts, which is the truth. Let's be honest about that. But all Marines are basic riflemen.

Interviewer

Tell us about when you got to Vietnam and what you saw in those early years.

Dave Magee

Okay. First of all, when they departed off the USS Princeton in '62, HMM-362 went off and they went to a place called Soc Trang. And again, it was an old, almost abandoned World War II Japanese airstrip that was there. And they had some huts and I remember a building at the far end. But again, I was just in and out on that most of the time. And then the next time that I went into country, I mean, I would just go in and out in '60 to '63. It was kind of a - we weren't there type thing.

Interviewer

Was there shooting going on?

Dave Magee

Oh, yeah. And like you were saying earlier, they were using the M-16, AR-15 at that time. It was the test and evaluation. And most of the people that were using that thought it was horrible; just not a good weapon. Didn't have any knockdown power. It wasn't good for helicopters because you had the magazines you had to keep reloading. You needed a machine gun type thing, and there was no mounts.

Interviewer

So you were engaging in enemy clear back in '62?

Dave Magee

The helicopter squadrons that were there in '62, '63, '64, they were advisors. And the only time an advisor can – quote – shoot is if he's directly protecting his own life. Well, if you're going into a zone and receiving fire from that zone, you're protecting your own life just to get down onto the ground, per se. So they weren't really breaking any rules; maybe modifying the situation or whatever, but not breaking any of the rules.

Interviewer

What were you told you were doing in Vietnam in 1962?

Dave Magee

Well, I don't recall even being told anything about that. Again, I was actually stationed in Okinawa and just transitioned down there every once in awhile. The HMM, the UH-34 squadrons were physically down there one at a time, and they'd rotate every six months.

Interviewer

What was the talk between the Marines?

Dave Magee

There was very little interaction. That's what I'm saying is they were down there, and when they'd come back up they would be the lucky ones. They got to see combat and we didn't type thing. They'd go to the club and they were the heroes. They were in a shooting situation. They were the heroes. That's what marines are all about, if you think about it. And then I was transferred out of helicopters into jets, into A-4s. Being an avionics man in the Marine Corps you do a lot of different things. So I had a year in Iwakuni, Japan where I was one of the few guys that had

secret clearance. So I got to do the mail run down there, and I'd fly in a C-130 and go from Iwakuni, Japan to Okinawa to pick up the mail, into Da Nang. Then from Da Nang, we'd go back to Okinawa, spend the night, and back up to Iwakuni. We'd do that every week. It was just a logistics run to whatever.

Interviewer

So you're seeing things escalating, aren't you?

Dave Magee

A little bit, yes, because we'd moved from Soc Trang up to Da Nang, and then you had some Air Force people there and some squadrons, Air Force squadrons, as well as the Marines. A bigger area, more Marines. Again, the advisors. It was not Marine Corps action, per se. They were advising the South Vietnamese on how to do firing maneuver and all the other good things that a good combat unit needs to have. The fire discipline and things like that.

Interviewer

When did you really feel like you'd gone into combat in Vietnam?

Dave Magee

1965. That's when the first real build up was. In early '65, we had a group leave Okinawa and go to Marble Mountain, which is Da Nang. And then in mid to late August of '65 I was sent from jets to MAG-36, Marine Air Group 36, which is back into the helicopters. Had two days, and then we departed on my favorite ship, the Princeton, to go back into country as a Marine air group at a place called Khe Ha.

Interviewer

Tell us about it.

Dave Magee

Khe Ha was the side of a mountain, per se. It was just a little flat area. And when we landed there, the old term that a Marine is a basic rifleman held true. See, I was a corporal, new guy coming from jets into helicopters, so didn't know too many people and whatever. And about the fourth or fifth day at sea, the gunnery sergeant that was running my shop sent me down to the hangar deck to report to some other gunny that I didn't know. And he started teaching us arm and hand signals and firing maneuver and defensive positions. And to be quite honest, I thought that it was all just busywork to keep Marines occupied while we were going over.

And then on the 31st of August he told us revelry went at 0430, chow 0500, muster 0530 to draw ammunition. And we were a reactionary platoon, a provisional rifle company. And all aviation Marines, when we landed, we were briefed it was gonna be an opposed landing. So on the way in, I remember thinking that I was a corporal, I was 22 years old, I was blah, blah. And I kept thinking wait a minute, I've got a squad here that I'm in charge of. I've got half of 'em here and the other half are in this other aircraft. What am I supposed to be doing? This was all stuff that was all new to me. This is what the average grunt does on a daily basis. I honestly understood the responsibility of what

a grunt 20-year-old corporal, how much responsibility he has. He's got 12 other lives that depend on what he has to say. That's a lot of responsibility.

And anyway, we landed. It was not opposed. It was just a landing. And we made a parameter up around the base, and then Seabee's lying mats and whatever. So the base of Khe Ha was built. And my first flight, my very first flight in a UH-34, other than coming ashore, you know, Sergeant Jerry Thomas come running by me and said, "Grab a helmet. We've gotta medevac." So I reached down, grabbed a helmet, was running behind him and I said, "Jerry, I've never fired the M-60 machine gun." He turns around while we're running, he says, "I'll teach you on the way." And he did. When we got airborne he asked the pilots, he said, "Hey, can we go clear the guns?" you know, check and make sure that they're working right. And so they flew out over the water. He showed me how to load it right, then he went like this and I reached down and put about a five-round burst out. And he gave me the thumbs up, you're good to go. He walked over, sat down, threw his gun out, did a five-round burst. Then we flew in for the medevac.

Interviewer

Were you under fire?

Dave Magee

Oh, yeah. That medevac was the one that was my baptism of fire. And when we got back, I spent probably 20-, 30 minutes just cleaning up all the brass and whatever that we had expended, maybe 500 rounds or so. Thinking I passed the test, I'm a real Marine. I've been under fire. And from then I flew almost every month from October to July of '67. I would fly. And I did several operations, major ones.

The most unique one for me was Operation Utah. Coincidence. And that one, as we were going, and the reason it's so amazing to me, or I shouldn't say amazing but means so much to me is as we were making a left-hand turn going into the zone we took a .51 caliber in the main rotor blade. Took a section of the main rotor blade out, and the aircraft was thumping as it went in. And to me, in my memory, says that we left that aircraft there. And in talking to the lieutenant that was the copilot a few years ago, couple years ago, he said, "No, we flew it back." And that's the blur, the fog of war or whatever you wanna call it. You get so wrapped up in what you're doing, you know, other things don't really matter that much.

Interviewer

What changes did you see in those two years? You must've seen an escalation.

Dave Magee

Huge. Huge escalation. Between we'll say '62, remember it was one little squadron in there. And then in early '65 there was one group, which is four squadrons in some support units. And then by the end of '65, right, we had two full groups, which is roughly 200 aircraft from 24. The enemy contact was escalating also. There was much more

contact in '65, '66, and it continued to escalate when I went back in '69. Same thing.

Interviewer

So you went back in '69?

Dave Magee

Yeah. In a different type aircraft--in CH-53s.

Interviewer

How much bigger was the war by the time you got back in '69?

Dave Magee

Again, the NVA, that's the first time I got to say, quote, "NVA," North Vietnamese Army. Regulars. Before that, we were fighting VCs, and you heard tell about the NVA, but we never seen them as an organized military unit. It was always like their advisors type thing. But when you start seeing the enemy in uniforms, all equipped the same, they are an army, North Vietnamese Army. And they used to come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail that you hear about, which is several different trails. It's not – quote – one. But they'd come down there, and then it became a regular war, per se. And you rarely flew anywhere. In '65, I'm sorry, we pretty much felt that we owned the area. I mean, we literally owned. Nobody was shooting at us towards the end of '66, '67. We had pretty well quelled the Central Highlands, or we thought we had. And then, of course, every time the grunts, you know, would take a hill they'd give it back. Take a hill-- then they'd give it back. You know, quote, "the war of attrition."

Interviewer

When you came back in '69 did you own it?

Dave Magee

No. No. Again, the NVA had started in and started taking it, per se. Again, you asked me earlier to talk about the difference in Kennedy, LBJ. Kennedy, we were allowed to do pretty much whatever. There were still rules of engagement, but not anywhere near like they was under Johnson. We could not fire until we had approval, right? I mean, if they shot at you, you had to call back to somebody sitting at a desk somewhere on a radarscope or whatever, and they give you permission to return fire. Yes. And that happened on every occasion.

The only time you could, quote, "fire without approval," and that was kind of a local thing, is if you lost communication. So we would just unplug our ICS when we got fired in, and then start returning fire. Because on more than one occasion, by the time you got permission to fire it was over anyway. A classic example is we were on an emergency ammunition resupply. Well, that tells you that there's friendlies in an area, and we know that. We were on the way in and we got fire from just everywhere. Did a wave off and called our control zone. At the time it was Land Shark Alpha. Told 'em we were receiving fire, and they told us, "Wait one." Orbited around and come back in. Second time, and again, "Wait one." So we tried a different direction of approach, and they finally come back and said, "Negative return fire. There's friendlies in the area." Well, we knew that. We were trying to resupply

the friendlies. They were sitting at a desk somewhere. And again, that was Johnson. He made a statement at one time that you could not bomb an outhouse in there unless he gave permission. And I believe, and I may be wrong there, but I think that was one of his quotes that he had a thumb on everything. And when you have such tight things, it goes downhill.

Interviewer

What are your fellow Marines saying about this?

Dave Magee

You don't really wanna know. We all just felt it was much easier to return fire. It's easier to beg forgiveness than it is to get permission. Yeah. Just do it, and you're gonna come out of it alive and what are they gonna do? If they court marshal you, so what. You're alive to accept that court marshal. There's no such thing as just sitting there waiting for them to just shoot at you. You're not gonna do it. Nobody in their right mind would do it, but yet that's what they seemed to want us to do. And it just doesn't work that way.

Interviewer

You came back another tour, right?

Dave Magee

Well, in '69 I came back. And as I said, again, it was still not that much different. Again, there was a lot more enemy activity-- a lot more than any earlier years. But our mission had not changed greatly. The Tet Offensive had already taken place, and contrary to popular belief, we did not lose Tet, by the way. I was in the States, but we did not lose Tet. That's when we lost the political support in the U.S. because they thought we were taking so many casualties and whatever.

Interviewer

You go back to Vietnam one more time, don't you?

Dave Magee

Actually, from '69, then I go back again in '72 to '73, sweeping the mines out of North Vietnamese harbors. And I did bring in an article on that for you to look at.

Interviewer

What was a day in the life of a gunnery sergeant?

Dave Magee

Okay. Well, first of all in '65 I was a corporal and then a sergeant and a staff sergeant. I went overseas as a corporal and came back a staff sergeant, which was rather unheard of. The war escalated and we needed more staff NCOs and whatever, so it was just normal attrition or whatever.

But the duties in '65 through '66, I was supposedly an aircraft electrician, but I would fix the aircraft at night and then fly in the daytime. And then maybe get a medevac at night or whatever where you just drop your tools from

what you're working on, run to the medevac aircraft and go in and go. It's an assigned duty. They spread that out so that no one person has to take all the medevacs and whatever. But the duties was basically make sure all the aircraft were up. And as a sergeant, I had about a 12- or 13-man shop depending on whatever. Telling them what aircraft to fix at what time and, you know, who was working on it. Just standard kind of a foreman type position.

And then as a staff sergeant, I had a four-aircraft detachment that was kinda mine that I worked with and scheduled the maintenance and did the maintenance on it, and did the flying and whatever. I was a staff sergeant in '69 also. And then as a gunnery sergeant I went back sweeping the mines, and there again, I was just basically a shop foreman where you tell people who's working on what aircraft at what time and standard things like that. And then I flew as what's called a RADST operator. I never did know what RADST stood for, but it was a table that you'd set up, look up to, and it had the pens on it with the flow in it, and we would direct the pilot either to go left or right to stay on a certain path so that we knew when the harbors were completely swept 'cause they had done a step at a time all the way across the harbor from point A to point B in a complete grid square type.

Interviewer

You're towing a minesweeping device?

Dave Magee

Yes, yes. You're about 20 feet above the water with a thousand pounds of tension out about 500 yards behind you towing what we always called the mop for magnetic orange pole. Mop. It was a device that when an acoustic mine goes off from the sounds that a ship makes, and magnetic is from the magnetic that a ship does going over them. The old World War II mines with the horns on 'em, they were a contact mine, and those were something we did not put in Haiphong Harbor.

Interviewer

So now you're in Haiphong Harbor?

Dave Magee

Okay. Part of the Paris peace talks was that we had to sweep the mines that we had put in earlier. The political idea of ending the war, you know, Nixon's ending the war with honor and whatever, is we had to – quote – clean up our mess is the way I feel about it. They were arguing over the shape of the table and whatever, and that was what the politicians and everybody was saying. But the real argument is we will release your prisoners as soon as you clear our mines. When you clear our harbors, the prisoners can come home. And it's kinda coincidental that we cleared the mines and everything was done, and the prisoners got released. And we brought in the newspaper clippings of that.

Interviewer

Talk about being in the capital of the enemy.

Dave Magee

Well, the war was basically over. Yes, it was still a, quote, declared war, but there was no firing. The only thing they did really say to us was that you can clear these mines. Do not go any farther north than this point 'cause if you go farther north than this point, we will shoot you down. And they had wooden hulled boats that went with us.

Interviewer

But what were your feelings about being so deep into enemy territory? This was a surreal experience, wasn't it?

Dave Magee

Not really. You go where you're told to go. I'm sorry, we were with the taskforce. It wasn't just one little ship and one little helicopter. We were with a full taskforce. Probably enough firepower that in Ha Noi they weren't gonna mess with us. They had already been bombed so much anyway that they were almost nonexistent. I'm not sure exactly what you're asking me.

Interviewer

Here you're fighting a war, and suddenly you're in the deepest part of enemy territory at the end of a war. What are your feelings about seeing an enemy capital?

Dave Magee

We never seen it from the air. We were in the harbor. I can show you pictures of Hon Gai Harbor and the mist and whatever. But we never actually got ashore. We would sweep the mines from an LPH. And as far as my personal feelings on being up that far, I was glad it was over. Quite honestly, the fact that I was up there meant that I didn't have to go back down south again and get shot at. There was no shooting going on. And Marines are, I guess, a different breed than most. We don't question what we're supposed to be doing. We've been told this is what we're gonna do. We go do it.

Interviewer

Talk about the changes you saw in the United States between tours.

Dave Magee

Wow. Again, from the first tour in '62, '63 in coming back from A-4s when I was in Japan and whatever, the war was not even a subject of communications. I mean, nobody even talked about it. Most people didn't even know it was going on. Then in '65 to '67 when I was there, leaving in '65, that was the first big hint that there was a war going on. I mean, the civilian population around California, all of a sudden almost an entire Marine Corps base kinda is gone. The city of Santa Ana probably didn't miss a whole bunch, but the city of Tustin, almost that entire Marine Corps air station, Tustin, all of MAG-36 departed one night, right. Took about two weeks and we were gone. When I came back in '67, actually most people were for us at that time. You were coming back from combat, and it wasn't all that bad. And then, again, when Tet came, that was the major change. That's where we, quote, lost the public opinion.

Interviewer

Tell us about how you knew it personally.

Dave Magee

Personally, I was disgusted with the American population. They were going on whatever. A bunch of kids running out there, you know, long-haired college students that had no idea what the real world was like. They'd spent their time in academia and that was it. Total disgust. I was just as disgusted with them as they were of me, shall I say. It sounded good; we'll do it. And like you were saying, the whole, quote, sexual revolution, and all that other good stuff did not really affect at least the people I was with. We didn't have time for all of that. We were trying to win a war, if that makes any sense to you at all. It's hard to explain. When you're in a Marine Corps squadron or you're on a Marine Corps base, you're kind of your own little city. It's a pretty tight-knit little organization.

Interviewer

Were you sad or angry about what was going on in the United States?

Dave Magee

Wasn't that part of our reason for even being there? Or I shouldn't say part of our reason. But we were going over to, quote, stop the domino effect. And we were doing it so that they had the right to protest. I mean, that's the American way, to protest. Or not necessarily protest, but you have the right to. Public speaking. I'm allowed to voice my opinion at anytime, anywhere, if I so choose. Try it in Russia during that timeframe. Try and voice your own opinion in Russia during that same timeframe. I don't know if I'm making myself clear on that, but that's what the American military was about, all of us, was defending our freedom. Whether it be in a foreign country or right here on the shore, we were still defending our freedom. And that's the way we looked at it, and I still do today.

Interviewer

Were you not trying to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese people?

Dave Magee

To have some form of democracy, you know, whatever it was. Remember, it was divided between the North and South. Kinda the same principle as Korea where it was divided at the 38th parallel. Well, it was the same type thing. You had a flourishing South Korea, and North Korea being under communist rule was not. We wanted to give Vietnam the same benefit that we'd given the Korean type thing. At least that was my opinion of what we were doing. And it was not to just go over there and do nothing.

Interviewer

What do you mean by "America did not lose Tet?"

Dave Magee

Tet. As you were saying, was a complete surprise. Yeah, it was a surprise. Now, I physically was not there at Tet. But when I say we didn't lose Tet militarily, we did not lose Tet. There was, I'm gonna say, better than a ten to one kill ratio of our casualties to theirs. They gained no ground. They were basically defeated after the Tet Offensive.

But then again, where I say we lost Tet was we lost the American people's support. That's when all the campus unrest and the get out and, you know, all the names they were calling us, and whatever, really started. Up until then, there was really not any anti-military, and people were not against us being in Vietnam as much. That's basically where I say that everybody says we lost the battle, Tet, that big thing. We didn't. We won everywhere. Every major battle in the whole Tet Offensive, the NVA and the VC were defeated, very much so. But we lost. Because Johnson was telling everybody how good everything was going, and then all of a sudden, over NBC, ABC, CBS, whatever, all these horrible pictures of the Vietnamese have broken into our embassy. Yeah, they blew a hole in one wall of the embassy, and everybody that got through died. They didn't win that. But the psychological warfare and just the idea that an American embassy could be gotten into, and that where Johnson said everything was going good and gee, all of a sudden there's major battles through the whole country. We lost psychologically the American people. They weren't willing to put up with that any longer. And that's where Tet hurt us.

Interviewer

Did you have any personal experience with news people?

Dave Magee

Yeah. In about '66 we were flying a strike, and I don't remember which operation it was or whatever. I just remember that a prominent newsman, and I'm not gonna give his name, came aboard our aircraft. He was gonna be on the first wave, which means he was taking a Marine's place. And he was asking a couple of questions, and I give him my answers and he didn't like my answers because, well, he was again, trying to make it appear as if we were going to go into some little village or something and destroy a village just for the fun of it or whatever.

And I told him that to my knowledge we were going out as a blocking force for the grunts. We were putting in more of them, and they had a bunch of the enemy kind of captured. Anyway, he wanted to be part of that first wave so he'd see just what it feels like to go into a zone. And when we got into the zone, he wasn't gonna get out of the helicopter. There was a lot of people, a lot of action going on. He didn't wanna get out, so we threw him out. We did. Was his choice. He's the one that got on that aircraft. You only get a one-way trip unless you're wounded because we gotta go back and pick up more Marines and get them in there. And to drag him back. He asked for it. That's what he wanted to do so we let him.

Interviewer

How do you know he didn't like your answer?

Dave Magee

Because he put his microphone away and his facial expression. You can tell if you've answered somebody and they don't like what you said. I pretty much knew he didn't like what I said. I don't even remember what the question was, to be quite honest. It wasn't that important of a question. And other news media, I don't think I had much experience with them at all, quite honestly. Some local Sea-Tac or local Marine news type for our local paper and whatever, but

nothing else as far as the national media.

Interviewer

Did you see newspapers and television when you were over there and see what was being reported?

Dave Magee

Most of the time TV was there, but that, again, Saigon had it but the outlying areas where we were, you never seen TV. You heard Armed Forces Radio, and that was all mostly just music.

Interviewer

Did you ever listen to Hanoi Hattie or anything like that?

Dave Magee

No, I didn't. Very honestly, I never even heard of that until after I got back to the States. Still it's kind of a new thing to me. I've heard about it, but not really.

Interviewer

Tell us some "boys will be boys" stories.

Dave Magee

Everything that comes to mind is somewhat grim. Gallows humor, I guess is what you'd wanna say. I mean, like, Thumbs Pointer, his nickname was Thumbs. Jerry Pointer. On his first tour in '64, he got shrapnel and shot in the leg, right. So on his flight suit, he painted a target on this leg, a nice target with the Gallows humor and he'd fly with his legs sticking out and whatever. Just Gallows humor. And then one day he got shot in the other leg. Literally hit in the other leg. He didn't even tell anybody he'd been hit. He flew the rest of the mission, come down, landed, got out, did all his crew chief duties, right, except for getting the pilot's helmet. And he just started walking away from the aircraft and the pilot said, "Sergeant Pointer, where you going?" He said, "I'm going to sick bay. Those blank, blank, blank, shot me in the wrong leg," and walked off. I know that there were some other really humorous, but I just can't think of any right now.

Interviewer

Did you get leave?

Dave Magee

Well, yeah. That's another thing. I had a four-day in-country R and R in Saigon. Now, don't take this personally, but remember the Army was getting combat pay in Saigon. Yeah. They were in-country, so they were drawing all their combat pay and they were at times getting shot at. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. So I was going to R and R, and landed in Tan Son Nhat, went into the R and R Center that they had set up, and the individual said, "Anybody here staying at the Meyer Court Hotel?" Of course, my reservations was the Meyer Court, and I raised my hand and said yeah. And he says, "Well, you gotta find another hotel. It was bombed last night." VC bombed my hotel. Anyway, Saigon itself, when you go out around is a very beautiful city. I mean it was the, quote, pearl of the Orient before the Vietnam War really got started. I seen a lot of the temples, the Buddhist temples and whatever. It

was interesting, the five days I spent there. And then another of the R and R centers was the beach just outside of Da Nang.

Interviewer

China Beach?

Dave Magee

China Beach, yeah. And that used to be just that. They would just go up there and be able to sit and lie in the sun and do whatever. Again, most of the, quote, good R and Rs I went to Taipei, Taiwan. That was the most beautiful city I've ever been in. It was clean. Remember right here in Salt Lake City they used to have the water running down the gutters to clean 'em? Taipei had that. That was one of the things I noticed. It was the only city in the Orient that I had been to that had clean streets. I mean, absolutely impeccable city. Really nice. I went to see just a lot of things that I had never seen before.

Interviewer

Were you in R and R on China Beach?

Dave Magee

No.

Interviewer

Let's talk about your wife. When did you meet her?

Dave Magee

We are the marriage that was absolutely never gonna last. Could not possibly last. I was just coming in after 23 months in-country, and I went to visit a friend of mine. And she happened to live above him. And we met, and his girlfriend was her roommate and whatever, so we met and we started courting, just going out while I was here. And then I went to North Carolina for my duty station. Called her one night, and well, I called her almost every night. But then I finally said, "I guess I'm supposed to ask you if you wanted to come out here and get married. It'd be a good idea." And basically, she said yes. And of course that raised the ruckus. We didn't know each other long enough-- blah, blah, blah. It was never gonna last. As you know, 44 years now, it's lasted pretty well. I did two tours in Vietnam. The '69 to '70, and then up north in '72 to '73 cleaning the mines after we were married. I had one R and R. Went to Bangkok, Thailand, and again, one of the most beautiful cities. Just gorgeous. Contrary to popular belief, most of the guys didn't go out on R and R and just get totally drunk every night. We actually got to see the city. Ruined your whole idea, didn't I?

Interviewer

Tell us about writing your wife and her writing you.

Dave Magee

The everyday things. She was writing me of how our daughter was growing and blah, blah, blah. Things like that. I was writing her, answering her, quote, questions and statements and, you know, the everyday things.

One time I wrote about how quiet it was. And, I mean it-- it had really been quiet for about a week. We hadn't had an aircraft take any fire. Nothing. It was just quiet. And when I dropped that letter in the mailbox, the first mortar hit behind me. And I'm sure that that letter was probably still in the air; hadn't reached the bottom of the box before that mortar landed. And so when she's reading the letter of how quiet it is, she's listening to NBC news of how the base I was on had been mortared so badly that night. She didn't believe too many of my letters after that when it was quiet and nothing going on. I assume she didn't, anyway. But it's just you write the same letters that if you were to go to New York and spend a month, two months, three months, you would write.

Well, now you call and whatever. But just standard everyday things. She would send me little notes that the kids had written, or little pictures that they had drawn and whatever, and I would put 'em up in my living area. Standard things. When I say our living area, a modified tent. They call 'em a hooch. And they're, oh, I'm gonna say twelve by twenty for, say, eight to ten men to share made out of tin roof, plywood floor, plywood up about four foot, and then some screens that would swing open. And yeah, that was our living conditions. We did have a good mess hall most of the time.

Interviewer

What did it mean to get a letter from her?

Dave Magee

A lot. When you're in a situation like that, very honestly the news from home is very, very important, especially if you can get 'em in sequence, 'cause quite often they would come outta sequence. The mail at that time was not exactly a priority on shipments to get overseas, so they would be out of sequence, and sometimes I would get that she was sick or my daughter was sick. And I think she had mumps once. And then the next letter was something about we just went someplace or doing something and you're wondering. And you have to kind of look at the dates and see what's going on. Oh, there's a week's difference there. She's better. She doesn't have the mumps anymore and whatever. I can't remember what it was. But the letters were very important for morale, or at least for me. Again, I can't speak for everybody and I'm sure that most people think that they were very, very important 'cause people didn't miss a mail call, if that means anything. And the packages were very, very important to us flight crew because sometimes you'd be flying and you wouldn't get to evening mail or you wouldn't get to lunch or whatever. And you can only eat so many C-rations. We would love sardines and crackers. They were a great meal over there. They really were.

Interviewer

Did you ever get a chance to call her?

Dave Magee

We had a span where we were pulled out of Haiphong Harbor because the Paris Peace Talks had broken down,

and we went to the Philippines. And I actually got to bring her for what was going to be a ten-day leave to the Philippines. And we got to go on a leave together for five days because then I got that magic phone call, "Hey, take her back to the airport and get back here. We're pulling out to back up and sweep the mines." The Paris Peace Talks had started up again.

Interviewer

That must've been tough.

Dave Magee

Yeah. That was a toughie. That particular tour, we were on a, shall I say mental roller coaster because it was you're clearing the mines, the war will end. Well, we're not clearing the mines. The war may start again. Bring your family over. Oh, send her home. Yeah. So we were on kind of a roller coaster during that time span. And I'm sure that the other units were in that same roller coaster. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. It was not just us.

Interviewer

How was it seeing your children between tours?

Dave Magee

It's a complete reversal of roles. I'm gonna say in the '69, '70 time span when my daughter was very young, I was going from a combat-hardened Marine to a loving father. Doesn't happen overnight. I'm sorry, it just does not happen overnight. I think that was some of the difficult times was coming home and not knowing how you were gonna be treated and is it all gonna be the same.

Interviewer

What were the challenges when you returned from service?

Dave Magee

Well, I think I just mentioned the biggest challenge was just going from combat hardened to a loving individual. You can't do that. It's virtually impossible to change overnight. You've still got the stupid little things of getting up in the middle of the night and wandering. Just not being comfortable no matter where you're at. You've always got that keyed up thing. And that takes time to fade away. And I don't think it ever really truly fades away. But it's extremely hard the first 90 days or so after you come home. Stupid little things like really wanting fresh milk in the fridge. It's gotta be there. That's got to be there. Was a very, very big thing 'cause you go a year without drinking a glass of milk. Doesn't seem like it's much a big deal to you, but try and do it when you can't have the milk. Just different things like that from my prospective. Now, she may have a totally different prospective of it of her walking on eggshells. What's this Marine gonna be like?

Interviewer

Talk about coming home the last time.

Dave Magee

Again, from Operation End Sweep it was a totally different situation 'cause we were stationed in Hawaii at that time.

So we left Hawaii, right back to Hawaii. Hawaii was different than the mainland. It really was. Just totally different. We were living in our, again, that little Marine Corps community. We were living on base. We didn't go out in town all that much so I never felt any difference at all when I come back. In '70 when I came back, by then it was a lot of anti-military and I think I was more angry about being told to take your uniform off and do not wear it off base than I was of anything else. When I was told as a Marine to take my uniform off so that I wouldn't make any of these civilians angry at me, that really hurt 'cause we felt we were doing the right thing. And to this day I still get a little emotional about that. Not a good thing to do. The American people really let their military down in my mind. We went over doing what we thought was right, and I still think it was right, and I still think we could've had a different ending, should've had a different ending. But that's the way it goes. Again, that's the American way. The people have the rule. That's what the vote and whatever's all about.

Interviewer

Talk about the drug use in Vietnam.

Dave Magee

Well, as I said, I think in all tours I seen one incident where there was, quote, use of drugs, and that was two people that had been out in Da Nang somewhere and they came back and they were high. I'm assuming it was marijuana. And they were just thumbed. I mean, they were beaten upon by the rest of the squadron. Several individuals letting them know that you do not have drugs anywhere around us. And I'm not saying that there were not other drugs available, but to me, I never, never in the entire time I was over there seen drugs being used or even knew about 'em being used. I think it was the biggest fallacy. Again, I am gonna blame our media, the liberal news media. And I shouldn't say it that way. Just the news media. They get one incident. And I've seen it on TV where the guy was blowing marijuana up to the barrel of a shotgun. Well, that's one incident out in the bush somewhere that one little squad or fire team did and they're making it sound like it was the entire military. Everybody in the Army did that. Everybody in the Marine Corps did that. It was just not true. There may be another guy of a lower rank or later years or whatever that says, "Oh, yeah, we used drugs all the time." I didn't see it.

Interviewer

Why was it so important that you impress upon these two individuals never to use drugs?

Dave Magee

Because the guy standing next to you is the person you're willing to die for. Is he gonna be willing to die for you if he's on drugs? Can you trust him? That's why it's so important. Combat, you're not fighting to, quote, kill the enemy. You're fighting to save the guy next to you or whatever. It's just that important to you that if you don't have that trust and that bond, then you can't go to combat and be effective. You just cannot. I'm not saying that there was no drugs. I'm just saying they weren't prevalent when I was around. Let me put it that way. I never seen 'em.

Interviewer

Finish the statement: The Vietnam War was…?

Dave Magee

Okay. Funny you should ask. I used to talk to seventh and eighth graders every year. My wife is a teacher's assistant, and one of her teachers that she worked with would ask me if I would mind talking about the Vietnam War. And I would go in once a year when she would ask me to, and I'd give them a talk.

To me, the major difference between the wars, like I said, is World War II you had major battles. And I mean huge, major, major battles. But they were also at a distance. The B-17s you see flying over dropping bombs, they never got to see any of the results of that bombing. The infantry men was usually artillery. There were very little close-quarter battles. Most of Vietnam were close-quarter battles because that was the VCs tactic was to get as close to us as they could so that our artillery and our fixed-wing jet support couldn't take 'em out. If they were too close, you'd be hitting friendlies. As long as they were in close they were safe and they knew that. So it was mostly close, in-hand battles where you could pretty much see the enemy. And I used to dispel a lot of the, quote, misconceptions of the way the Vietnam War was taught in schools.

Just that, the drug use. I used to say just like I just told you, there just wasn't that much drug use. The idea that we were just burning villages just to be burning them. No. Just about every village that was ever burned was as a result of they found big cashes of ammunition and rice and whatever. I'm sure you've probably seen the movie "Platoon." Everybody walked away there thinking that we were the bad guys, at least that was the impression I got. Well, if they'd have paid any attention at all, even where that village was burned, that scene where the village was burned, if you recall, as they were approaching the village that guy took off running, and that sergeant said, "Don't shoot him. Let him go." Had he been a normal, average run of the day villager, he would not have ran. He had no reason to run. He was a VC. That's the first thing I noticed.

Secondly, remember that they went in into the tunnel rat, and when he popped his head up into that hospital. Do you remember that scene? Well, doesn't that tell you that that was a VC hospital? And then there was enough rice to feed a battalion. I think that was one of the statements. Well, that rice to feed a battalion, the average village had enough to feed a village. A VC village would have enough rice to feed a battalion 'cause they were. So we burned that village. To the average civilian, we burned an innocent village. "There was no reason to burn down that village." And 'cause I seen the movie, and I'm thinking okay, yeah, VC village. I would have burned it, too. But I think that's the biggest thing is the way the American people basically were I guess taught burning a village was just a random act just because we felt like doing it. And that's not why they were burned. Remember the explosions as they were leaving? Hmm, wonder what that was. But most of the people I talked to after that were saying how anti-military that show was. My concept of it.

Interviewer

So you're fighting Hollywood. You're fighting news media.

Dave Magee

Exactly. Well, as I said when I first started this interview, in my mind I know what's gonna be good, but in my heart I've gotta question it. Well, is this gonna be used for the betterment of the military or anti-military? That's what went through my mind when I first volunteered to come in and talk. And that's why there's been very, very little real pro-Vietnam era films, media or even in the educational system. Like World War II you hear a lot about. Vietnam they don't even mention. Wonder why?

Interviewer

And were you aware that you were there to help the South Vietnamese? A lot of guys say, "I didn't even think of them at the end of the war. I just wanted to save my buddies and get the hell outta there."

Dave Magee

At the end of the war, yeah, maybe. But you go into the average, quote, village or whatever, they're dirt poor. They don't care who's running the government. All they wanna do is survive. And that war's been going on through the French. We keep forgetting about that. The French, for how long did they have Vietnam? When it was French Indochina.

Interviewer

The Japanese.

Dave Magee

Oh, the Japanese before that. Yeah. The book "A Street Without Joy," I think it was, was the French Indochina thing, and then Dien Bien Phu and all of this stuff. But the average South Vietnamese farmer family, whatever, they really didn't care who won the war. They just wanted to be able to go back and do their rice. You know, just grow rice and eat and be human just like we do.

Interviewer

I read in a book, it said, "I don't care who wins or who you are, just don't break my rice bowl."

Dave Magee

Exactly. And that's the whole point. The average South Vietnamese, in a city they're like any other city folks. They do whatever they have to do. But all the little farmer wanted was to just be able to provide for his family. Don't kill his water buffalo. You kill his water buffalo you starve his family. And so those were the things that we were very conscious of, right. You didn't shoot at a water buffalo. I mean, it may sound petty to the average American, but that water buffalo is their life. That's their livelihood. It's like trying to take a harvester away from a farmer, or whatever equipment they use now because that water buffalo is the only equipment they have.

Interviewer

Describe the role of advisors early on in the war.

Dave Magee

Again, the advisors for me, they were really before my time, shall I say. Actually, the squadron that came out in '64 turned all their helicopters over to the South Vietnamese Air Force and taught them how to maintain 'em, taught 'em how to fly 'em and everything else. We were trying to, even then, just advise 'em, right. But there's no way you can advise in a war and not fight part of it. It can't be done because human nature says if somebody's shooting at you you're gonna shoot back. But as far as the actual role of the advisor is just as the name applies. He's to advise. This is the way we do it. You should do it this way maybe. Here's how you fix this. And that's what they did.

Interviewer

When you hear helicopters does it bring the war back?

Dave Magee

Yeah. It makes me long to be up there with it. I'm sorry. It's a unique thing. Helicopters were so important because it saved the grunts, you know, the average Marine, soldier, whatever, the ground troops. When he had to move five miles through thick jungle, he didn't have to walk. He was picked up, transported and put in. Whenever there was an action where maybe a small platoon or a small squad or whatever needed help, poof, within 20, 30 minutes there was a whole bunch of people there to help him. They didn't have to carry water. They didn't have to hunt for water 'cause we brought it in to 'em. When they needed ammunition, we brought it to 'em. When they were wounded, we came and got 'em. And that's the big thing. That is the one mission that every helicopter man dreaded, absolutely dreaded and loved to go on.

We dreaded it because you didn't know what you were gonna look at when you got out there. It could be a no fire, the guy fell down and broke an arm, or it could be that they're still completely surrounded and they've got three that are dying if they don't get to a hospital. And you better go in and get 'em. And the idea of bringing home the wounded and letting 'em live, that's neat.

Again, I have a little personal story. I was at a reunion in '07, one of the reunions that I assist and help put on. And I had medevaced a brother of one of the guys that was in our squadron, and I never did know how it all turned out. And the guy that was in our squadron showed up to the reunion and we were talking. I said, "You know, I medevaced your brother. How's he doing," and whatever. And he opens his cell phone, plays with it a little bit and says, "Hey, I got a guy who wants to talk to you." Hands me the phone. I got to talk to a guy that I medevaced. What a thrill to know how one turned out. When I seen him last, the guy in front of him had stepped on a landmine and he was full of holes. He had lost a finger and a couple other wounds, and then holes. Lots of blood. That's the way I seen him last. I didn't know if he lived or died. And to talk to him 30 years later was just really neat. Just indescribable. End of discussion.

Interviewer

Anything else?

Dave Magee

Well, I've got out the misconception of the drug use. That to me is a big thing. And the idea that we would just randomly shoot, kill and burn villages and whatever. That didn't happen. And if there's one thing that I think needs to be said, is we were just over there doing our job. Nothing extra. Just doing our job. That's what we went into the Marine Corps for, right, is to defend America, all enemies foreign and domestic. I think that's just about all I really have to say.

A friend of mine named Roy Brush, he went out on a mission, and I think it was a resupply mission. I don't even know what it was. But they just drew tons of fire. I mean, lots of fire. So much fire that he had ran out of ammunition, right. Just basically ran out of ammunition. He bent over, picked up another can, what was gonna be his last hundred rounds, right. And he brought it up, set it on the seat, and when he opened it up someone had taken the ammunition out and put tools in it. And he was throwing wrenches, literally just throwing wrenches. And when he came back into the shop after, he come walking back into the shop and his eyes were about the size of silver dollars, and he's going, "R- r- r-, throw rocks. Throw rocks." He actually had thrown every tool in that box to make 'em quit shooting at him while they were climbing out. That's what she wanted me to tell you about.

Interviewer

Talk about some of your struggles after Vietnam.

Dave Magee

Oh, just the alcoholism and PTSD and whatever. Yes.

Interviewer

When did you recognize that you had some serious problems?

Dave Magee

Well, for me to recognize it myself, probably about 1983, '84. But for her, probably around '71 or '72, whatever. But for me to literally seek help for the PTSD and the anger and whatever, that wasn't until about 2000. And I got involved with the VA for the very first time. Before that, I would never even get near the VA because of just the anger. Well, I was basically forced in because of diabetes. And anybody that ever stepped foot on Vietnam, they automatically say if you're diabetic it's service connected and you have to go register. But if I hadn't have ran into a very intelligent counselor in the VA -- when I say counselor I was submitting all of my paperwork. And he read it and he read it, and then he turned it around and slid it back. He said, "Now, write down your PTSD." And I said, "I don't have PTSD." He says, "Yes, you do." I said, "No, I don't have PTSD." He said, "Nobody that flew four years in Marine Corps helicopters in Vietnam could not have it. You have it. Put it down." And so I did. And low and behold, contrary to my personal opinion, I had PTSD. About 70 percent disabled from it.

Interviewer

How did PTSD manifest in your home?

Dave Magee

Well, I think I honestly did not know how to love. And I hate to say that. When I got back, I truly didn't. I tolerated both my kids for a lot of years. I mean, that was it. I tolerated 'em. I fathered 'em, I have to tolerate 'em. And now that I've had some counseling and understand that what I did wasn't so bad and all this other good stuff, I think I have a really good relationship with both of 'em. My son calls basically every week, week and a half, we get phone calls. My wife has the Sunday calls to both of 'em, and I even get mentioned in 'em. Things like this that for a long time we didn't have. They tolerated me and I tolerated them type thing. And we're past that stage now. We actually have some family, and it's neat.

Interviewer

The war did harden you?

Dave Magee

Oh, yes.

Interviewer

The military's an alcohol culture.

Dave Magee

Pretty much, yeah. Yeah. And so you didn't notice that you were, quote, drinking way too much. It was a way of life. Initially over there it was a way to go to sleep. I'm sorry-- you can be so exhausted that you're too tired to sleep. And then you've still got your day's activity running through your head. What'd I do right? What'd I do wrong? I would need a few drinks just to settle down. And I won't even say relax. I'll just say just to let my mind get off of everything, if that makes any sense. I don't know how to explain it other than just like you said, it was a culture. And so there was drinking all the time.

Interviewer

I remember officers were given a liquor ration.

Dave Magee

Oh, yeah. Well, we had ration cards and whatever. Yeah. But most of the time for the Marine Corps, after you got to an actual base that had it, they had clubs and you could go in and just drink yourself into oblivion if you wanted to. Most of us drank a lot, but we would always make sure that we didn't drink so much that we wouldn't be able to get up in the morning and go out and do our job. And I think that was the biggest thing. That's what saved a lot of 'em from becoming alcoholic. And I was pretty much that way. I tried at my level best to not have it affect my job. And then after I retired, I never found a job that gave me the personal satisfaction that being in the military did. There was never, shall I say, the same amount of responsibility, no matter what job I ever got, as there was as a corporal in the Marine Corps. And I think I mentioned flying in, the amount of responsibility that the average 20-year-old corporal has. Twelve men's lives? What civilian job gives you that responsibility? You can't name one. So it wasn't important that I be ready to function the next morning so my alcohol, I just didn't stop.