



Transcript of Drayton "Drake" Markle interview Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Tell us your name and how to spell your name. And what year you got into Vietnam.

Drayton Markle

I'm Drayton Markle. It's D-r-a-y-t-o-n. But I go by Drake. I arrived in Vietnam in April of 1969 for my first tour.

Interviewer

How old were you then?

Drayton Markle

I was 21.

Interviewer

And did you enlist?

Drayton Markle

I was already in the Florida National Guard, and I just requested active duty.

Interviewer

And years of service in that war?

Drayton Markle

18 months.

Interviewer

And you left from Florida then?

Drayton Markle

Yes.

Interviewer

Just mention you served from Vietnam from when to when.

Drayton Markle

My first tour I served from April to April 1969 to 1970. Then I went back to Vietnam in... I believe it was October of 1970 and I ETS'd, or I finished my military obligation, in April of 1971.

Interviewer

Okay. So let's talk about your first tour briefly. You were a crewman on a Duster?

Drayton Markle

Yes.

Interviewer

And what was your title?

Drayton Markle

I started out as a gunner on a Duster, which is an armored vehicle. It's an old tank, M-41 Walker Bulldog body, but it has the turret removed and a twin 40 millimeter turret replaced it. It was mainly an anti-aircraft weapon.

Interviewer

And that's what you did?

Drayton Markle

Yes, I loaded it, then I became gunner, and eventually I was the track commander.

Interviewer

What does a track commander do?

Drayton Markle

He's in charge of the vehicle and the men with him. He makes sure that there's fuel in the vehicle, that it's ready to go at a moment's notice. He makes sure that the men are ready to go, too, when they need to perform. And, of course, he receives instruction from the squad leader because we always go out in sets of two. And as we maneuver, we need to know where each other is and if there is some shooting going on, we have to arrange ourselves so that we protect each other.

Interviewer

What is the purpose of the Duster?

Drayton Markle

Well, like I said, the Duster was an anti-aircraft weapon but since there were no aircraft from the enemy, we were mainly used in support of ground operations, running convoys, as security, providing security at firebases and night

defensive positions and operations like that, where they needed a lot of firepower. Because the Duster could put out 240 rounds of ammunition a minute.

Interviewer

Were you also providing security at night?

Drayton Markle

Yes. We usually, as individuals, we'd have about two-hour guard duty which was really listening for the radio in case something happened. So after working a 12-hour, 14-hour day, we also had to provide that guard for perimeter defense for two hours. So it got to be a long time.

Interviewer

You were sleeping in your Duster?

Drayton Markle

No, a lot of times we just slept on the ground by it. Some places we did have folding cots which was pretty nice, so we didn't have to sleep right on the ground.

Interviewer

Did you feel pretty safe and secure operating a Duster, or did you feel vulnerable?

Drayton Markle

No, I felt okay about it. I didn't really feel like I was in eminent danger, but I understood that there was a \$10,000 American equivalent if an NVA could hit our Duster and knock it out. So they were looking for us.

Interviewer

So first tour you were providing support for?

Drayton Markle

Mainly the 1st Infantry Division. We worked with the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division. So we usually had two Dusters, a section of Dusters go out with, say, a company of 1st Infantry.

Interviewer

And they're at the front and the back?

Drayton Markle

There's not really a defined front. You're just there. And they could hit you from any side.

Interviewer

And what was it like working with the 1st Infantry. Talk about the guys. What were their missions?

Drayton Markle

It was mainly sweep operations. We would get word that there might be a battalion or a reinforcing company of Viet Cong or NVA in the area, and we'd go out looking for them. So we provided the extra firepower they needed.

Interviewer

You can keep talking if something pops into your head or an experience.

Drayton Markle

We never really got to know, you know, the guys, say, in a particular infantry company that we worked with because we mainly had to stay with our vehicle in case something happened. I do remember one time we were performing what was called a hammer and anvil, and we were the anvil. And we were going to provide a blocking force where the maneuver force or the hammer was going to push the NVA into us. And we had to knock down some trees, some smaller trees in this single canopy jungle. And, of course, we used the back of the Duster. And we hit this tree several times to knock it down so that we could pull in behind it and have a better field of fire. And all we did was knock a bunch of fire ants loose and they fell down on us, and there were quite a few welts raised. So for that operation that was the worst we got.

Interviewer

So let's go to your second tour, which is in '71.

Drayton Markle

That's something north. That was in I Corps. And I was with the 24th Corps, but we were attached to 5th Mechanized Infantry.

Interviewer

And how did your job and your role change in that second tour?

Drayton Markle

Okay, most of the crews were already full, and I was an E-5, a heart-stripy 5. And what they needed was someone who knew how to fix the guns. And so because of that, that's where I was assigned, mainly as a gun mechanic, which we nicknamed the "gun bunny." And so if a track loses a gun like the camshaft breaks on it, the spindle on the camshaft breaks, I had to be ready to go wherever it was, assess the problem and provide the repair because a basic crew didn't know how to do a lot of that repair work. I did do quite a bit of depot work. Some of the work that I

did was, or actually should've, been done in the United States. But all I had was a little old shed that I had to bring a Duster in. It had misfired, and it blew the gun apart, basically. So I had to pull all the guts out of both guns, pull it out of the turret and replace it with another set and then put all the springs and the dowels and the gun linkages back together. Like I said, that should've been done stateside, but we just didn't have time or the ability to lose a Duster for that long.

Interviewer

Should we go right to Lam Son 719?

Drayton Markle

Sure.

Interviewer

So talk about Lam Son 719. You said it was one of the last battles of the war. Talk about going into the Laotian incursion. Let's talk about that.

Drayton Markle

Lam Son 719 was the last major operation of the U.S. Army. We were to provide protection for the ARVN forces or the South Vietnamese forces that were going into Lao to break up a North Vietnamese Army that was stockpiling and getting ready for a big push into South Vietnam from the northwest corner of Vietnam. So it was about a three-month long operation from start to finish. We tried to keep it as secret as possible, and I think a lot of it did get out. Now no American troops were supposed to be on the ground, although we were going to provide air cover in the form of jets, fighter bombers and helicopters, gunships and also cargo craft to try to help the South Vietnamese forces that were going to go into Lao. But as far as the Americans themselves, we were not allowed on the ground to go in. We started out in February. It was pretty cold because it had been raining for about 30 days, if I remember right. It wasn't a real downpour, it was just a drizzle, and it drenched you to the bone. With the humidity like it was in Southeast Asia, it was very chilling. And we spent several weeks leapfrogging from one position to the other to the northwest corner of Vietnam.

For instance, we went past Khe Sanh, and most everybody knows the history of Khe Sanh. We also passed Lang Vay where the Special Forces' camp had been overrun by North Vietnamese PT-76 amphibious tanks. So we were getting to the corner of where North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Lao intersected. And we set up a position about 200 yards from the boundary line of Lao. In fact, there was a mountain in front of us. It was called Koh Rah. It was about 300 yards from us. And from Koh Rah we received quite a bit of 122 millimeter rocket fire down into our position. And our position consisted of two batteries, one 175 millimeter canons and 8-inch Howitzer. And we were going to be the ground support protection for them. That was mainly where we were situated.

Interviewer

So you were just on the other side of this?

Drayton Markle

We were just the other side of the border, still in South Vietnam.

Interviewer

You said you could look into the DMZ and see NVA.

Drayton Markle

Well, if I went to say the northeast corner where a little firebase was, we called it Alpha-1, which was right on the beach of the South China Sea, you could look into North Vietnam. And they used to run up a big North Vietnamese flag and you could see it with the naked eye, we were that close to 'em. And we had a series of firebases along the DMZ, or demilitarized zone, that we occupied, and it was about the same the whole way across.

Interviewer

Talk about some of the fighting and the firepower.

Drayton Markle

The first month we were there we would receive rocket mortar fire mainly. We never had a ground attack at the base at Koh Rah Mountain. I can't remember the date right now, but the North Vietnamese began to push into South Vietnam. You can remember from history how the South Vietnamese Army was overrun in some positions, and they were scrambling to get out. And we were there still trying to protect the 175 millimeter Howitzers and the 8-inch canons, although we never got direct fire as far as ground troops from the North Vietnamese. But the rocket fire became extremely intensive, and we had to pull back closer to Khe Sanh. And we were ordered about two or three days later because when the order came to withdraw, some of the vehicles – the Howitzers are self-propelled – they couldn't get 'em started, and they didn't want them to fall into North Vietnamese hands. So the Dusters, a Cherry Picker, which is the recovery vehicle, a light recovery vehicle, were tasked to go back to the border and try to retrieve as many of those disabled Howitzers as we possibly could. Now the 5th Mech Infantry, with the 1st and 77th Armored, had set up some strong points along the road. We passed by some of those. I remember seeing one the first time we went out there, had to go past them.

There must have been three armored personnel carriers, which are really aluminum. Just destroyed right there. I

remember one, the front slope of it had been hit by an RPG and you could see the aluminum still melting on it. The .50 caliber machine gun, which is mounted because of its weight, had sunk in because there was no support to keep it up. There was a tank, an M-48 tank, also destroyed. And there were several bodies in body bags waiting for evacuation. There was a helicopter, apparently, I don't know, I never heard, that had been disabled. And it was just sitting there on the ground. I don't know if it had come in to resupply with ammo and pick up wounded and dead or what. But we had to pass that. And there is a part of a highway where an old bridge used to be, but you had to, because the bridge was destroyed, you had to go down to the river itself and then up the other side, which causes you to really slow down. So you're sitting targets and they had pretty much zeroed in on that.

Well, we came out of that bridge, there was five vehicles –there were two Dusters, the Cherry Picker, a mechanic's five-ton truck, and an APC (an Armored Personnel Carrier) –and just as we got to the crest of that depression, the NVA opened up on us, and I think that was about... probably the heaviest fight that I'd ever been in. You know, you're okay when you're actually doing it; it's the apprehension of waiting when's it going to happen. But once you get into it, you just do your job. They stopped, and of course we stopped firing because we had to conserve ammo, we had just what we had on the track.

I remember a Sheridan, which is a light armor assault vehicle, sitting on a crest above us, probably about ten feet off the roadway. And there were two crewmen on it. And from out of nowhere, actually, our back behind us, you could see the little smoky trail of an RPG heading right for it. They go really slow. I'm sure some of these Major League batters could actually hit one, you know? They do, they go that slow. And it was really comical to see them, it was almost like a staged event because at the same time, both of those guys on the Sheridan, like a hatch below opened simultaneously, and they disappeared. And the RPG went over them and just blew up. Well, of course I'd been on the trail track, we turned around and tried to fire suppressing fire at the gunner, but I'm sure he was long gone by then. But that was a heavy firefight.

Interviewer

Were guys lost in that firefight?

Drayton Markle

From our group, no. From the 1st and 77th or the 5th Mec Company down the road, I really don't know.

Interviewer

It was just scary. You're visually kind of going to that moment, what are you seeing?

Drayton Markle

I can see it. I remember when the fires first started, I had to put the gun in auto-fire, the cocking handle into auto-fire and turn the selector level to fire. And it was just like then doing your job, you know? I knew I had to keep grabbing rounds outside. Now our rounds came in clumps of four. And you had to drop them into the automatic loader, and, of course, from there they would fire. We did receive mortar fire. We could tell where this mortar, I'm sure it was probably about an 81 millimeter mortar, we could tell where he was firing from because you could see the puffs of smoke. And we swung the guns around because that was the biggest threat to us right then. And we either scared the heck out of him and he left, or we actually did hit him because I didn't see any secondary explosions, so we didn't hit any of their rounds, but at least he quit firing.

Interviewer

We're still talking about Lam Son?

Drayton Markle

Lam Son 719, the first day.

Interviewer

So would you consider that the elephant, seeing the elephant?

Drayton Markle

Yeah.

Interviewer

Could you mention that day, the first day of Lam Son I saw the elephant?

Drayton Markle

The first day that we actually went back to the border and the firefight that I'd mentioned we'd gotten into was literally what soldiers throughout history called "seeing the elephant," which is a slang term for being in combat. So, yeah, it was there, and he was big. And we did that three days. I remember coming back to our base, we were able to pull one eight-inch back. While we were there at the border we also destroyed a lot of ammunition, too, so say the gunpowder couldn't be used in the mine or something somewhere else. So we threw incendiary grenades on it, which ignited it. We tried to rig explosives so that the projectiles, which also contained explosives, could not be used by the enemy. And we went back those other days, two more days, to get the other Howitzers out.

Interviewer

So where are the South Vietnamese forces?

Drayton Markle

I don't know, I never saw 'em.

Interviewer

You never saw them?

Drayton Markle

Never saw 'em.

Interviewer

You supported them, but you never saw them?

Drayton Markle

Never saw 'em. I don't know if they were climbing on helicopters and flying out or if a commander had gotten his forces together and they actually marched out or you know, walked out. I really don't know. I never saw any.

Interviewer

Talk about the ARVN's a little bit and if they were good fighters, if they were interested in fighting or if they had any sense, in your understanding, of the drawdown, if they had any sense that it was drawing down at that time, too.

Drayton Markle

I believe everybody knew in 1970 and '71 that the war was coming to an end. You had a lot of congressional pressure trying to end it, mainly from the Democratic Party. Church, for instance, was a big pusher to get us out. And I think that a lot of the Americans developed the attitude, "I don't want to be the last one," meaning the last one to lose his life there because we're going to be shutting the door pretty soon. The South Vietnamese, I had mixed feelings about that. I think that they knew what was going to happen to them, especially if it was found out that they had participated in the army, that they would probably not be around too much longer once the North Vietnamese got a hold of 'em. I felt sorry for the people. I think they're like people anywhere; they just want to live, raise your children, maybe improve life a little. I don't think they were loyal to a central government because Vietnam had been a tribal, if you would, civilization for a long time. The village chief was the guy they looked up to. And to pledge their allegiance to a central government in Saigon, I think that was asking a lot of them. I personally didn't think the average South Vietnamese soldier, we called them ARVN – Army of the Vietnamese Republic – I didn't think they were a good fighter. Now they had some good units like the airborne units, those were good fighters, but I was never around them.

In fact, I remembered an incident at a bridge where the ARVN were acting as guards for this bridge, they were to try to keep VC or NVA from planting explosives along the pilings and blowing the bridge up. Well, we had to get to a firebase called Khe Gio Bridge, which is kind of an interesting firebase. It's built up on a very steep hill. We had a section of Dusters up there. In fact, they had come under ground attack one time, and sappers got in and threw a grenade into a bunker for a crew of Duster crewmen were sleeping, and one of them threw himself on the grenade. And I don't remember his name right now. He received the Medal of Honor for that. But we were trying to get there to resupply, bring gun parts to 'em, those kinds of things. And the ARVN's held us up at this bridge. And I was sitting in the back of this five-ton truck, and I was so irritated I grabbed my rifle, and I just clicked it off of safe onto automatic fire. And the guys in front, the sergeant in front said, "Don't do it," because we were way outnumbered. So we threw off a couple of cases of C-rations, and they let us through. But that's the kind of soldier I always picture as an ARVN.

Interviewer

I'm surprised they wouldn't let you through.

Drayton Markle

Well, they wanted food. I'm surprised they didn't want money from us, too.

Interviewer

I never heard that. So your opinion at the end of the war, '70, '71?

Drayton Markle

For the average ARVN is not a very high respect. And you can see how rapidly they collapsed once the North Vietnamese really started moving in. They really were just tired of fighting. I mean, they had been fighting the French, the Chinese, the Japanese, so maybe they were just tired of fighting, I don't know.

Interviewer

Yeah, other guys have said they just wanted to get back to their villages and homes and families.

Drayton Markle

Yeah.

Interviewer

Did you see the elephant any other times?

Drayton Markle

Well, yeah, the three days we went out because it was the same thing. They were waiting for us. They knew that

we wanted to get those artillery pieces back. It got so bad that we actually pushed one of 175's down a ravine just to make it harder for them because we couldn't pull it out. And they said we had to cease that operation. I know that on the last time we went through, we came under another mortar barrage. And there was a 5th Mec Infantry Company there that begged us to stay, you know, with the massive amount of firepower a Duster could put out, they wanted us to stay with them. It would've been fine with me, but we were ordered to get those guns back to a safe place where they could be fixed and probably used again.

Interviewer

I want people to get a sense of the culture in Vietnam and what you're talking about.

Drayton Markle

You mean like churches and stuff or?

Interviewer

No. When you served in Lam Son, was there communication amongst yourselves where you were saying you didn't want to be the last one to die, and how was that reflected in conversations and the daily life and task of soldiers?

Drayton Markle

Well, actually saying, "I don't want to be the last one" was not really spoken. But the general trend was, "I just want to go home." You know, cross the pond, take the big bird because most guys would fly home in a commercial liner. There was a lot of talk about what they would do when they get home and you know, things like that. So, I think, even though it was never really verbally expressed, there was that underlying tone, but it was expressed as "I just want an ETS" (Enlisted Termination of Service). "I want to get out. I want to get back to my life."

Interviewer

Talk about the drugs and the boredom. Did you observe that in the 1st Infantry? What did you observe?

Drayton Markle

Well, the first time that I really noticed drug problems was actually in my crew. We really didn't deal that much with, say for instance, the 1st Infantry Division. Although we worked with 3rd Brigade of the 1st Division, we really didn't mingle with them. We had our own hooch, or bunker, when we were in the firebase, Lai Khe – it's a city. We stayed pretty much to ourselves because our job was different. We would go out at night, set up wherever base defense told us to put the Dusters, and we were pretty much by our self. Some places we did have meals, we called them "wets" because they were prepared, they weren't in cans. But we never really mingled with members in the other units that we were around because our job was to protect each other. For instance, when we set up a strong point, on one side of the road would be one Duster, on the other side would be the sister track. And then as you go down the road, you would have APC's doing the same thing. So we never really had that opportunity, that chance, to really mingle. Now if you were at an NDP for instance, yeah, you could.

Interviewer

What is that?

Drayton Markle

NDP – Night Defensive Position. This one shouldn't go on the air. I think I'd gone about six days without really proper hygiene. And I finally said I've had enough. So I broke out a new, clean set of fatigues, and it couldn't have been choreographed better. Just as soon as I had finished dressing – now this is at night about six o'clock – there was a Cherry Picker that had come into the night defensive position, and we needed to fuel up. We were gasoline-powered, which is kind of dangerous to begin with because most of the other vehicles are diesel. And they picked up this bladder, I think it was something like a 600-gallon bladder of gasoline. And everything was going okay except there was no connection on the bladder to put the hose to gravity feed it into our fuel tanks. Now the driver and the squad leader, the track commander, are mainly responsible for doing that, but then I hear my name being called, so I go outside the bunker and I yelled across, "Yeah!" We need the connection off of this bladder that was next to our bunker. Well, it had been raining so much there that as soon as you step off the pallet sidewalk they had constructed, you went right up to your knees in mud. It was lateritic soil, and it was gooey, and of course the bladder had formed a suction with the mud, so it was a pain to try to lift it up to get to the connection. And believe it or not, there were some bad words that were said. And you know, you have to remember that this was a clean set of fatigues I had just put on, and I refused other offers for help in a very polite manner. I finally got the connection, I went over to where the fueling was taking place, I gave them connection, and everything was great. Later that night, the call of nature hit me, and so I went to the facilities there, which is really a... wooden bench with holes cut in it. And I was sitting there feeling a little better, and this guy – I don't know who he was – came over and had to use the facilities, too – it was a two-holer. And we got to talking and usually you would say something like, "Oh, how's things going?" "Well I'm short," meaning I don't have a lot of time left here because I think about then, I had about a month and a half or so to go. And he says, "Hey, did you hear that guy?" I said, "What guy was that?" "Oh, there was this guy, he must have been mad about something." And I said, "Yeah, I heard him. That was terrible, wasn't it? He must have been really mad." [Laugh]

Interviewer

It was you.

Drayton Markle

It was me. [Laugh] That was one of the humorous things that happened there. I never told him that it was me.

Interviewer

You should've.

Drayton Markle

No, that would've ruined it.

Interviewer

You said there's nothing more dangerous than a bored soldier.

Drayton Markle

I don't know if I used those words, I might have.

Interviewer

Is that why they got into drugs?

Drayton Markle

Yes. I really believe that the boredom was starting to set in because even though the Duster crews went out a lot, guys that were in battery, that is they stayed behind and did other functions, they had a lot of time on their hands. Even though a Duster battery, which consists of six-team tracks, you have about a third of the men that are not combat: cooks, clerks, the motor mechanics, people that work in supply. And I think even though the day ended at five o'clock, a lot of times they would slip away and get into drugs. I do remember a time at Lai Khe we were called out to go on night perimeter defense, and one of my guys had really been puffing away. Now I think the marijuana there was a little stronger than what was being sold in the United States at the same time, and I knew something was wrong – I wasn't sure what. And I literally had to put him in the azimuth tracker seat because he couldn't do it on his own.

As a squad leader, as the track commander, I had to observe where the fire was going and base defense had given us a range and an azimuth that they wanted us to sweep down with duster fire, and so I had to say, "Okay, listen, here's where you start, crank it this way twice and then come back twice, you know?" And I knew he was on something, I found out later he had been smoking some stuff. I had heard of... well, there was a section chief, that's an E-6, he had caught one of his guys that had a package. I don't know what it was but quite a bit of maybe opium or something like that.

Interviewer

Did you find it important for the public to know about the drugs? We've got one guy that said, "Why are you even asking this?" He said everybody drank, why are you even making it a question?

Drayton Markle

I don't believe that the drug problem, which I'm going to include alcohol abuse in also, was out of control. I know it was worse than when I first got there. But I think that it became, yes, addictive, but also that was the way of numbing the boredom that had set in. I remember reading a story, even before I went over there, of a squad that was supposed to have gone out on ambush. They went into a village, they got into a hooch there, they lit up, and they spent most of the night getting stoned, and sometime during the night, VC possibly, came in and killed 'em because they were just out of it. I do remember we were going out to, I think it's called Firebase Jim, but I'm not 100 percent sure, we were going along at about a mile an hour because we were protecting an engineer mine detector unit. They had the old mine detector, the earphones and all, and they would sweep the road for metal, which might indicate there was a mine underneath.

And I don't know which firebase it was from, I don't know if it was right off of Lai Khe, but these two people, higher headquarters and this unit, subordinate unit, were corresponding with each other and the gist of the matter was this guy had gotten some real heavy stuff, and they never said what it was – I don't know if PCP was back then or if it was opium or heroin or whatever it was, they never mentioned that – but apparently this guy went into a bunker – I think he was a cook – he went into a bunker with an M-16 rifle and there were three guys in there, and he says, "Any of you seen living hell?" and he opened up on 'em. Killed two of 'em and seriously wounded the other guy. Now that was in 1969. So I think we've had a drug problem, but I think you were having a drug problem in the United States just as bad, if not worse.

Interviewer

Did you ever do a urinalysis when you came home?

Drayton Markle

No. Never had to do a urinalysis.

Interviewer

Let's talk about coming home. Take us up to the week before you came home, what's going on, and then let's get

on that plane. You said the stewardess was surprised because nobody cheered, but let's move up to that.

Drayton Markle

Okay, I was pulled in off tracks about a week before I was actually to report to... boy, I can't even think of the name of the place now. It was mainly a matter of turning in my issued stuff like a rifle, my helmet, those kind of things. And I was sent after that, I spent about two days in battery, clearing battery, that is making sure that I had turned in all the equipment that I'd signed for. And then I was flown, along with some other guys to – boy, I can't think of the name of it. What's the famous – Da Nang. Da Nang. Yeah, I was flown down there where our battalion was located, and I went through the same process, you know, paperwork and so forth. And you could do most of that in about two hours, you know, making sure your pay records were right and all of this.

And most of the time though, you were in a transfer barrack, and it was just trying to kill time waiting for your flight, and then they would drive you out to the air strip, and you would board whenever the manifest came along that had your name on it. And I guess I was worried about it, I had a mustache at the time, and it had to be Army regulations and all this kind of stuff. So I would shave the corner here was, it was past the lip, and then it was shorter than the other side, so I would shorten the other side to try to match it up, and I finally just shaved it all off. We didn't have facilities to shower. Even though they wanted us to wear khaki, short-sleeve khakis, to fly home in, there were no shower facilities there. So we had a trailer that had a water tank on it, and you just had to kind of sponge bathe, which I thought was the silliest thing in the world.

Interviewer

So you get on that airplane. Talk about getting on the airplane, and it's quiet.

Drayton Markle

Well, you know, most of the guys that knew each other were coming from the same unit, they would sit together. There was no first class, no business class, it was all one, officers set among the men. I got on, I didn't know anyone else there because I had come over on this second tour by myself. So I didn't really have anybody that I knew to talk to, which was great because I planned to sleep quite a bit. I knew it was a long trip. I had made it over my first tour – I went home during my first tour because of my father's death. You know, I'd gone back for my second tour, so I'd crossed the Pacific several times. There was no movie, no earphones to plug into or anything to, you know, help you pass the time. If you had a book, which I didn't think of – picked one up at the PX or something – to read would've help pass the time.

But I was just glad I was on the plane. It was great to hear the engines firing up, and we rolled out off the tarmac onto the runway, and we took off. And I don't know if it was because the time of day or something or what – I know I was dead tired – and I really didn't feel like yahoo kind of thing. There wasn't any cheers or anything like that that you know, you're leaving. And I think this might be due, again, that there weren't a lot of guys that experienced what a war really was. And I'm not saying their job wasn't important or anything like that, but you know, after your first real firefight, it's hard to get to sleep, the adrenaline's pumping and so forth. A lot of them never experienced that. I do remember I was getting ready to leave for my first tour and a rocket hit... I can't remember the name of the camp now. It's a huge place. They had a swimming pool, they had a Lum's Restaurant. This is like an American city. Yeah, this rocket hit, and they fired up the incoming siren. I was headed into the NCO club, and I almost got overrun by guys coming out. And the first sergeant saw me the next day and jumped me because I needed to take it more serious, but you have to understand, you gotta be a little closer than that to get excited. So maybe I was just glad I was leaving, yes. Maybe I didn't express it outwardly, but I was happy to leave. You know, I knew I was going to school, finish some university work. But as far as cheering and all.

Interviewer

How did you feel about the war? Were you politically aware? Were you analyzing things, or was it just a job that you had to do, and then you wanted to go home?

Drayton Markle

I felt that if you didn't stop a dictatorship such as you found in the north – if you want to call it communism, that's fine – they wouldn't stop there, and so I felt that we needed to draw a line in the sand and say we'll only put up with it so long. And I think that we had failed in Southeast Asia and of course that feeling came to life just a few years later when the North took over and it spread into Lao, Burma – or Myanmar today – Cambodia. So I did feel that we needed to stand firm against a system that would subjugate the people like they were doing. I mean, even before the war, they had the vote of splitting, although Vietnam was not invited into the talks, which I found silly. But so many people that could left North Vietnam to move to South Vietnam because I think they saw what was going to happen. So I do feel that we did have a valid purpose there, but we didn't live up to our commitment.

Interviewer

You said on the phone, "Why did we do this, what have we gained?" Do you still feel that way about Vietnam?

Drayton Markle

Yeah, if you're not going to stand by those people, and you pull out, what did we gain from it? We lost 58,000 Americans. I don't know how many Vietnamese died. But we didn't gain anything. And we're not learning the lesson

today.

Interviewer

What was the deal with weapons and armory at the end of the war? I heard that some guys were told to burn their weapon cache. Why weren't they handed over to the Vietnamese Army?

Drayton Markle

Because they'd wind up in the North Vietnamese Army's hand.

Interviewer

Can you explain that?

Drayton Markle

Well, like in other wars, we left a lot of material behind. There's a unique way that a supply sergeant, a motor sergeant, gets extra things. Now, he has a listing of what he's entitled to or what that unit is entitled to. Any excess, there's a question: How did you get it? So rather than bring it back and maybe give it to a unit here in the United States or just have it in stock in case the unit needs it, we toss it over. I've talked with a guy from the Korean War, they did the same thing then on their way home, they dumped who knows how many thousands of dollars of tools into the ocean. I know we did leave a lot of weaponry behind, but the only advantage there was that the North Vietnamese would be able to use it, so I don't think you would gain a lot by leaving, especially weapons behind. And we could see that today. We give weapons to the country that supports us, they fall, and then whoever conquers them turns around and uses the weapons for other purposes, sometimes against us, when we have to go in somewhere else.

Interviewer

If we expect them to win, why aren't we giving them weapons? At least we're trying to help them win their own war as we pull out.

Drayton Markle

I really don't understand why we do what we do with weapons as we pull out of a country. To me, it would make sense that if you know you're closing the door, to start shipping them home. I don't know if there was enough political pressure in Congress to say no, we're not going to give weapons – although we gave quite a few to the South Vietnamese – I really don't know the behind-the-scenes makeup of why we did that. Maybe because the advisors – Creighton Abrams or whoever it might be – said, "It's a lost cause, they'll never be able to stop the North." We had stopped giving them air support. I think we were still fuddling ammunition and stuff to them, but I think their heart was just not in the fight. And maybe others saw that and said we might have to go back into a country around there, we don't want those weapons to be used against us somewhere else.

Interviewer

When you got home, there were no protesters. Talk about arriving in Seattle.

Drayton Markle

Okay, actually when I came home from my second tour, we landed in... McChord Air Force Base. I think is the Air Force base outside of Seattle, Washington, or Tacoma. And we were bussed to Fort Lewis, Washington, so it was a restricted area. I didn't get a chance to see, really, civilians other than dependents of military people from the time that we landed until when I got a taxi – well, there were several of us – got a taxi to take us out to Tacoma, Sea-Tac, to the airport to fly home. I did have steak this time – there was a traditional steak dinner for guys that had served there overseas, maybe in Korea, Japan. And all I really want to do is get my pay and then make my way back. We were wearing Class-A's again when we got in the cab to go to the airport to fly to different destinations. I didn't know any of the guys that I was in the taxi with, so there was a couple that knew each other, so they spent most of the time talking. I just was looking out the window, mainly. I got to the airport, went up to the desk and purchased my ticket.

Now of course there's all kinds of people at Sea-Tac. I never encountered anyone that was rude, offended by me being in the military. No one shouted "baby killer" or spit on me or spit at me. I really don't know – and I saw a lot of soldiers there in their uniforms waiting for flights also – I don't know where this came from. I am sure that there was probably in the latter part of the war because the American public was pretty anti-war by that time, or at least there was a vocal minority there to let you know their opposition to the war. Now, when you have, say, a half a million guys coming back from Vietnam, I'm sure that there's an incidence once or twice. But I guess if you talk to each soldier in confidence and all, and he says, yes, I was spit on, you probably had about 600,000 out of 500,000 that were spit on or spit at, which doesn't happen.

So I think the rumor or the incident kind of spread and that was what was expected of you to say. I'm not saying that it didn't happen, I just don't think it really happened as many times as we want to believe it did. For instance, the news media made a big about saying these guys from Vietnam are coming back and they're wild and they've done a lot of bad things. You have to remember that really, only about ten percent of the people in Vietnam were actually combat troops. I think the closest we ever had was in World War II where we had 20 percent combat troops and 80 percent support.

So... I remember seeing on "60 Minutes" this guy that supposedly had done a lot of really bad things to people in Vietnam. And he lived on Puget Sound in Washington state, and he lived in a lean-to made of branches and so forth, and on certain nights he would go out and just howl, you know, kind of like a wolf or a coyote. Well, the neat thing is it turned out that he had never been in the Army. He had made up the story. And I think the press, though, says, "Ah, here's a great example of what war can do to a person." However, I don't remember hearing "60 Minutes" say, "Those that watched our broadcast of such-and-such, you know, here's the real facts of the story."

Interviewer

So the public perception of the returning Vietnam vet was sort of manipulated, jaded, defined by the media?

Drayton Markle

I believe it was. And you can see that today. Look at, say, in the Middle East. The soldiers today are heroes. Why has it changed? Well, the media is now saying you know, X about Afghanistan and so forth. Maybe because the president put his seal of approval on it, so that makes it an okay war. Where Vietnam, well, you have Richard Nixon take over and you know, it was such a terrible thing and these kind of things. You had Cindy Sheehan. I don't know. But I think the media is not taking their responsibility justifiably. They create the image that they want. And so I think they're failing on their first amendment right.

Interviewer

How do you feel today when people say "welcome home"?

Drayton Markle

Well, it's been a while so it doesn't stir me up quite as much, you know? I do remember I was in Baltimore, I'd just gotten back from my first tour, and I was being reassigned to a Nike-Hercules unit in Maryland, right outside of Washington, D.C., and I actually had two people come up to me – I was in my uniform because I flew military standby, although they put me in first class, which was great. They thanked me and that meant a lot to me then. So it would be nice, I think, and more truthful if those kinds of stories got out, that the American public wasn't totally and completely against the war in Vietnam. Of course those that yelled the most against the Vietnam War, where were their cries when the North took over and was slaughtering people in the South or in Cambodia? They were pretty silent. And that's a shame.

Interviewer

Everyone was silent about that. Veterans were angry. Families were indifferent, and weren't even talking to their sons about their service. Everybody just got quiet.

Drayton Markle

I think as a veteran, I just want to say, okay, I made it through, I think I did service honorably, I did what I was called upon to do. Okay, that chapter is closed. Let me go on with the next chapter. There's nothing I can do to change it. I think you see that in real Korean War veterans and World War II veterans, they don't talk a lot, which I think is a mistake. Maybe we could learn if some would speak up and say this is why I did this. But I think then you didn't want to be looked upon as, "Oh, he's one of those baby killers," you know, kind of things. Maybe just to keep quiet about it. You've got to remember a lot of those kids were like 19 and all. And that might have been their first exposure to the real world, and it's quite a rude awakening.

Interviewer

And they carry that tour through the rest of their life and then struggle. And they were just boys.

Drayton Markle

Well, you know, also, you have to look at it, too, that the suicide rate among veterans then was not as high as the average college student that had never been overseas. So even though they were supposed to be mixed up and all this kind of stuff, there are a lots of veterans that went on and made major accomplishments in their communities, states and so forth. Maybe the discipline, maybe seeing life from a different point of view matured them, and they said, "I don't want this, I don't want my children to grow up to have to face this."

Interviewer

Did that happen for you?

Drayton Markle

I don't think as much as maybe others. I wanted the children. I had to adopt my two children. I think the Agent Orange got a hold of me, and so I wasn't – well, I also caught malaria, too – so for whatever reason I wasn't able to have children. But I think my religious background was more influence on me for what I wanted for my children than the war experience, but there were a lot of guys that didn't have a background like I did. So maybe, you know, like I said, maybe they just matured a lot and said, "This is what I want. This is what I want for the coming generation."

Interviewer

One person seems to have more resilience than the next. And some of the guys really, really struggle for their whole lives. And then guys just came back and got an education and did well.

Drayton Markle

It could be a good family, too, that they come from that they know – I can't keep feeling sorry for myself, I have to move on. I have to improve. And maybe that's why so many got their life, if you want to use the word "straightened out" and became very productive citizens.

Interviewer

Some say had we not been treated like crap, things wouldn't have been so difficult for us.

Drayton Markle

Yeah, I wonder the story of some of these homeless veterans that we see on the streets and so forth. I just don't know. I don't remember what channel it was, showed this girl that was out panhandling. And she needed money for food and all that kind of stuff and the sad story she told. And this news crew followed her, they went to her home. So it was made up just as an easy way to make money.

Interviewer

Any last comments you wanted to share?

Drayton Markle

I just appreciate the opportunity to talk to ya.

Interviewer

Drake. Drayton's easier to remember.

Drayton Markle

Well, that's why I use that because in school it was really hard. So that's my father's name also.

Interviewer

Thank you for coming and sharing your story, especially about the end of the war and the spitting on.

Drayton Markle

A lot of misconceptions flying around out there.

Interviewer

There really is. One last question: What is the biggest misconception you'd like to share with the public about the Vietnam veteran?

Drayton Markle

I think that the biggest misconception that we have is the Hollywood feeding frenzy, if you would, that they're losers, they're wild, you never know when they'll go crazy on you, etc., etc. That kind of thing. I think if you served honorably, and I mean the honorably that comes from your own heart, that you did stuff that you could stand up and say, tell your mother, for instance. That you didn't... shoot some innocent village girl because she wouldn't perform for you, or stealing, things like that. That if you are an honorable person, just like anywhere else in life, how much integrity do you have. Did you have that when you had the uniform on? I think that would be the thing I would like most veterans to be able to say – yes, I served honorably and I didn't have any skeletons in the closet that I'm ashamed of.

Interviewer

And you think the public's perception is that they're crazy guys who have done horrific things?

Drayton Markle

Yeah. Well, I do feel that, that as far as the public is concerned, they need to know that, too. I think they have been misled by our media – Hollywood – into thinking that anyone that served has to be... crazy. And they're like a little time bomb and when the ticking stops, who's going to be around and catch the wrath? I mean you can find that kind of person in the general population. And I think that's what the American public needs to know. Yes, there are fewer and fewer people that have served, and they might not understand exactly what it's like, but they need to also understand that who did you get this information from?

I know that there were a lot of veterans that wanted to tell their story, but people didn't want to hear it because, well, that's not what I'm supposed to believe. I'm supposed to believe this about veterans, especially Vietnam veterans, because that was a crazy war, and there were drugs and these kind of things. But you know, people don't understand. Look at the American Civil War – they had a drug problem, too – morphine. Guys didn't know how to handle it. But we look back and say oh, the American Civil War soldier, what a brave and gallant guy he was. You know, he's not crazy, he's not going to snap, he's not into drugs. Although, all were drugs, and it was a problem. So if we could clear that up, too, it would probably help. And maybe even the families of some of these veterans, to really understand.

Interviewer

Thank you.