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"Escalation"

Interviewer

How did you get into the service?

Neil Olsen

Okay. Well, in high school I'd studied Vietnam a lot because we had this current events class. And I chose Vietnam 'cause there was a lot of things going on in 1964, and so I knew about the country and the government and the war. So when I was drafted out of college as an anthropology major, and I thought well, I wear glasses, I have flat feet and I've been in college. So I thought well, if I went to Vietnam, by the least chance of that, I'd probably be a Supply Sergeant or something like that. But that's not what happened. I ended up in combat, infantry. But I was drafted in February of 1967, and I took basic training at Fort Ord in California. Advanced Infantry and Advanced Individual Training, AIT, at Fort Polk, Louisiana. And then I had APC training, which is the track tanks that they use up at Fort Knox.

Interviewer

> Tell us about that basic training.

Neil Olsen

Yeah. Actually, Fort Ord, we were lucky because there was a meningitis outbreak. So they forced us to sleep eight hours a night, and then they had the windows open. But it was the usual Army basic training. You get up and do a lot of calisthenics. You run a lot. There's lots of screaming and yelling at you and they bring you down to size; some people were overweight and some people needed to get some more weight. And we had a lot of rifle training and different weapons training. But actually, compared to a lot of basic trainings, it was okay. It wasn't a lot of fun or anything but it was okay. Other places the people didn't get much sleep. Like at Fort Polk they only let us have about four hours sleep a night 'cause they said that's the way it's going to be in Vietnam, which turned out to not be true.

Interviewer

> Tell us about the training after basic.

Neil Olsen

That's right. Well, the AIT is the Advanced Individual Training and we went to Fort Polk, which is the Vietnam school. And that was a living hell, to be blunt. We were in the jungles out there in Fort Polk near Leesville in northwestern Louisiana. And they made it as realistic as possible. So we'd go out and stay overnight on these

missions. We'd have blanks in our rifles, and there would be snakes, and it rained all the time and you'd just sleep in the mud and run around and shoot. But it was pretty tough. And during the day you'd have your classes, your radio classes, your mapping classes and things like that. And since you'd only had four hours of sleep and it's very hot during the summer, a lot of people would fall asleep and they'd take you outside and make you stand in the sun till you woke up. And the one class that I did fall asleep in was radio-telephone class, radio operator class, and they took me outside and did that. In Vietnam, I was a radio operator for a while with my unit, so that was counterproductive.

Interviewer

> Is that why they're in Louisiana?

Neil Olsen

Humid, and there was a lot of rain. And it's in the swamps of Louisiana, which are similar to parts of Vietnam. So at least it got us ready for that. Then after that, some of us went up to Fort Knox for APC school, which is Armored Personnel Carrier. And even you've seen these in the recent wars where it's a tank unit that carries about 12 people into combat, and you can drive it and go through the water and everything. We're thinking, like, well, this would probably be a good thing 'cause it's armored. This would be a good thing in Vietnam. And then when we got to Vietnam, on the road one day there was a huge crater, and pieces of track and pieces of the APC all over the place where the Viet Cong had placed a landmine and they'd blown the thing to smithereens. So I thought okay, it's okay to be a ground pounder, just be on the ground and do that. So luckily we didn't get into a mechanized unit.

Interviewer

> Tell us about it.

Neil Olsen

Well, after all the training, we had a month off of vacation so we could go back home. And then, of course, you lose the knowledge. I'm not saying a month home is not a bad thing knowing that you're going to Vietnam. But you get a month off, and then at that point you reported to Oakland. And you report in, and then they put you on a commercial airliner out of Travis Air Force Base, and then you fly over to Vietnam. And I believe our flight landed in Hawaii for just a short time, and then it landed in Guam or Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines and then on into Saigon. And then when you got to Saigon, you'd go to what's called a replacement center, which is like a camp where everybody gets there and you sort of get acclimatized to the heat and everything, and they decide what units that you're going to be assigned to based on your basic training and your other training. So I was there, maybe about a week or so like that, and that was fairly miserable also. And then I was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, which operated out of Pleiku in Pleiku Province in the Central Highlands. So I was assigned as an infantryman up to that unit.

Interviewer

> Were there any servicemen that went with you over there?

Neil Olsen

Well, the whole flight is rented out by the airlines. I believe Continental did it and so the entire plane was filled with military personnel. It was a commercial airliner that was leased or rented by the military.

Interviewer

> Did you have flight attendants?

Neil Olsen

We had flight attendants.

Interviewer

> That served snacks and that kind of thing?

Neil Olsen

Yeah. It was kinda strange going over there knowing who knows what's gonna happen or anything like that.

Interviewer

> What happened after you were assigned to an infantry division?

Neil Olsen

Well, we had a little bit more orientation and training to the 4th Infantry Division. And then you get all your gear. You get your backpack and you get your rifle and all the proper equipment. And then we were driven out to the western border of Pleiku Province, and there was a firebase out there of the 4th Infantry Division. It was called Jackson Hole. And from there, I was inserted into a squad at that time in September, October of '67. We were the replacements of the original 4th Infantry Division people that'd come over. So those guys were absolutely just exhausted and war weary. So we would replace one and one in different squads and things. So I was inserted into a squad. And our mission was to explore along the Cambodian border and interdict the North Vietnamese Army, the NVA that would be coming in 'cause that was their way of doing that. This is actually a year after the Ia Drang Battle.

The 1st Cavalry got into an actual battle with the NVA, and they used helicopters and things. And it was a standoff. There's a couple of movies that have been made about that. So we were there a year afterwards, and it was still the same thing. We were going up and down, and sometimes you'd be hacking through the jungle and you'd come into this clearing and you'd see these paths going either way, large paths. And they were well kept and everything and you realized that was part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail for porters and bicycles and things like that. So that was interesting and very scary. We had very light contact and action at that point. And I lasted about a month in that situation because a lot of the commanders at that time were fighting the war like it was World War II or the Cold War tactics where the Soviet tanks would be coming across Poland, we would be responding. So they were fighting the war in the jungle that way.

It wasn't a counterinsurgency war, so we would go straight through something. There was a road we could go on,

but no, we had to hack through the jungle. And on a couple of days, we had a lot of people that got heat exhaustion and dehydration, and I was one of those. I was on point that day. And so I just completely collapsed and they medevaced me out of the field. In addition to that, when you're going through the bushes you get scratches and things. So I got what's called jungle rot, which is an infection on the skin and it doesn't heal in the moisture. And then I'd also contracted ringworm on my back, which is a little worm and it creates this great big ring and it oozes. So I was medevaced out and I was in a rehab area back at the base camp for a couple of weeks. And that was my combat unit on the ground with the 4th Infantry Division.

Interviewer

> I've heard that jungle rot doesn't ever heal.

Neil Olsen

The scars did heal. I think you change your skin, with all the cells and everything, about every seven years. So I had scars for several years from that, but I don't now. I mean, obviously, I've changed my skin several times since then. But after that I was assigned to what was called a Combined Mobile Improvement Team, which was the U.S. Army's version of the Marines CAP team, which was a team of Marines that would go into villages and work with the local troops, which were called popular forces, they were the very local troops. And they'd done this in the northern part of Vietnam in what's called I Corps, or the 1st Corps up north. Where we were in the Central Highlands was in II Corps. The country was militarily divided into four of these corps tactical zones.

And so the Marine program had been very successful in these small villages in keeping the VC and other enemy out of these villages. So the U.S. Army decided to copy the model. And I was on the Vanguard, or one of the beginning of these teams. And we could be slightly ill, and I also had an injury to my eye which happened at Fort Polk and I needed glasses. So there were three of us on the team. There was an officer, and he had a glass eye, and then there was me, I had a hole in my eye plus some other things, and then another NCO, Non-Commissioned Officer, on the team, and he had a hearing problem. So, I mean, between us we could function.

And so we were assigned to a MACV team down in Bao Loc, which was then the capital city of Lam Dong Province, which is the southernmost province in the Highlands. And it's very near Da Lat, which is this mountain resort that's very well known in Vietnam through history as an old French rest and recreation place. And it's a beautiful city up about, oh, four or five thousand feet high, which is quite cold and high for Vietnamese. So we were in the Highlands, which wasn't the steamy jungle. So it was a tea plantation growing area and coffee growing area. So we were assigned to what was called the Regional Forces. These were provincial forces. It's the Vietnamese equivalent of a National Guard.

And at that time where we were, the majority of the soldiers were minority people, or what's called Highlanders, or

in French, Montagnards, and it had Vietnamese cadres. So we would go out with these units, we would teach them marksmanship, we would grease and repair their weapons. They had World War II weapons, like M-1s and M-2s. Very poorly armed. And secure their weapons and fix that up and give them training in marksmanship. I taught some civics classes. We taught map reading when we could and radio procedure because the unit had that. And we'd go out with these companies on patrols.

And the province was essentially Viet Cong controlled, so we had a lot of ambushes and we had a lot of casualties. So, I mean, in hindsight, it was actually much more dangerous than being in a U.S. combat unit because in this province there were no American units and the helicopters from the next province were perhaps 20-, 25 minutes away at best, which in a fire fight is not good. But several times I've seen people vaporized right in front of me from artillery fire and what are now called IEDs, which then were booby traps and things like that.

They would put plastic, which is C-4 plastic which is an explosive, and then put lots of nuts and bolts in front of it and glass and anything else. And then that would be triggered off either by a long wire or some other device, and then it would blow out into the road. So we had that happen several times. And we kept telling the cadre, the little Regional Forces company troops, officers don't bunch up. And on this particular day they bunched up, and the mine wiped out the entire officer corps of that group. So that's the kind of conditions we lived under. The good news is that we would go back to the MACV compound. I wouldn't say it was an eight-to-five job, but we could go back at night when we weren't out patrolling or we weren't out at other sites where we'd be living, actually living with the troops, you know, for maybe a week at a time while we're training them. But we could come back to the province capital there, and that had a little American compound. So, you know, you had some meals and you had a bed, and that was the good part of it. So I enjoyed that for what it was. It was much better than being in the combat zone.

Interviewer

> Would you go out for a few hours or days?

Neil Olsen

It could be both; I mean, it could be any of that. It could be a short patrol during the day, or it could be, like, an overnight patrol or something like that. But these were people's troops. They'd been through very, very minimal basic training and they knew they were outgunned and outmaneuvered by the Viet Cong in that province. So it was hard to sometimes get them going, but they were motivated people. And just the presence of an American, there were three American military people there. Just our presence helped their morale. They're going, like, "Well, somebody cares. Somebody's out here." Because the Vietnamese government really didn't have the capacity at that point. The government was totally overstretched in the war. So there really wasn't a lot of support for these people, either material or morale-wise. But we'd go out and patrol.

One patrol that we did go out on, it was sort of a compass reading patrol, and we're stamping through the jungle. It was really hot during the day. Then we'd come back, and we'd go through this place and I'd go, "Wait a minute. We've been through here. We came this way. So now we're going this way. Okay. What's going on?" And then the troops started kinda, like, laughing a little bit. And then the third time we went through the same clearing I realized what'd happened. We're just out on a lark and they're leading us all around the place, trying to avoid doing anything. So we just went on this actuates route sort of to do the patrol. That wasn't the norm, though. But anyway, so those were some of the conditions that we were dealing with at that point in time.

Interviewer

> Give us a couple of unique experiences that you had during that time.

Neil Olsen

Okay. Well, I can give you some humorous ones. Well, slightly humorous given it's a war. But when I was back up in the 4th Infantry Division up in the northern Pleiku Province, we were out on a patrol one day. And this might've all happened in one day. It's 40 years of memory. But the guys in front of us in the patrol started doing all kinds of things and itching and screaming and pulling their clothes off. And we're going, "What?" And it turns out, they'd run into a huge nest of these red fire ants, and they got to all of us. And they raise these welts, they're horrible and they have poison and everything like that. So we'd run into this big hive of them, so everybody's running around and jumping around. And, I mean, afterwards it was humorous, but at the time it wasn't.

And then on a similar type of patrol, the soldiers in front of us were sitting there. All of a sudden, this big huge thing drops out of the tree onto this guy and he screams. And it turns out it's a python. It's this great big python about ten feet long, and it fell on him. It was either asleep or thought it was food. So a couple of the guys caught it and put a little bit of a stick in its mouth and wrapped him up and took him back. And they skinned him and ate him, and they said it tasted like chicken. They had some barbecue sauce out there. It was different than the C-rations that we had. And then the guys made hats with the python skin and everything like that. So that was sort of the humorous things.

Dangerous and scary things? Well, when I was an advisor down in the Lam Dong Province in the southern Highlands, there'd be just maybe three Americans and we'd be out with these Regional Forces troops. And we'd go out to their base, where their little base camps were. And these were not really that secure; they had some sandbags around there. And we had a radio so we could communicate with the province capital and maybe call in some help if we needed it while we were training. And it's just scary because you're out there, you're on your own, and you realize that the place could be overrun. And I do have a picture of two young men that were 16 years old and they were in the Regional Forces. And they have tennis shoes for boots, and these are just young kids, and took a picture. And seeing 16-year-old kids as soldiers was kinda unnerving but they were good soldiers.

And then when we left this camp, within a couple of days, the VC overran it. And it turns out somebody was either asleep or, understand from some other colleagues of mine, that somebody let the VC in. So everyone in the camp was killed. So what happened is we realized that while we were training these people, we had the radio, we had communications, but as soon as we would leave, then they would be vulnerable and the VC could attack them. So that was scary. You just realized you're out there and if something happens that's it. But that's part of the job and that's what you're doing.

Interviewer

> Did you spend the rest of your time as an advisor, or were you assigned some other duty?

Neil Olsen

No. The rest of the time I was in the southern Highlands. I was there until I left the country in August of '68. I did go on R and R to Hawaii very late 'cause I wanted to go to Hawaii. I had a girlfriend then that I would meet in Hawaii, so I waited to get that. 'Cause I was offered Bangkok or other places to go, but I just needed to get out of the country for a little while and get a little bit of rest and recreation. So that was the only time I left.

But while I was there in that unit, like I said, I was drafted as an undergraduate in anthropology, so I decided to put a silver lining in a rather dark cloud. So I started learning the language of the people, the tribal language. And it's called Jarai and it's related to Cambodian and very distantly to Vietnamese. And there's about a hundred thousand of these tribes-people. So I met some of the missionaries, and they gave me some materials, like, a grammar. And I started compiling a dictionary and doing things like that. So that kept me sort of busy and kept my mind off some of the uglier aspects of the war and the situation I was in.

And I would spend my off time with these people, too. They would take me out, and they'd go to some village and they'd show me something very proud, it was a brand new well, and it's got bricks around it. So they don't have to go quite a ways down a hill to get water from the river. So the well was a big deal, and I wish we'd done more wells than blowing up things. I think that would've, to quote the old expression, "Win their hearts and minds." So that was a lot of what I did.

I also wrote a lot of letters home, so I've kept them, and they're into a notebook. So I wrote about a hundred letters home and took about 500 pictures. And what I would do is I'd take the picture. I had a little 35 millimeter half-frame. I'd take the pictures. I'd send the roll home to my mother. She would develop the film, keep the negatives and send the positives to me. Then I'd write on the back of the prints who was in the picture and when it was taken and what it was, etc. So I have a really excellent record of my trip to Vietnam, so it's very well documented so people can see. Every soldier has a different story, but you can see what I did and how things operated at that point.

Interviewer

> Did you ever get ambushed?

Neil Olsen

People ask me did I ever shoot anybody, and I have to say I don't know. 'Cause, we got ambushed, but by the IEDs; we'd be there, and most of my experience was IEDs along the road. And then one instance, we'd come to a VC roadblock on that little highway that we had that ran through the province. That was our main duty, to protect Highway 20 that went from Saigon up to Da Lat. And Lam Dong was right in the middle of that; most of the highway ran through the province. And so we came to a roadblock in the road 'cause the VC would set up roadblocks. And we shot at it and put grenades in it to make sure it wasn't booby-trapped. And then we decided to call in some artillery, and someone somewhere had given them the exact coordinates of where we were standing, so the artillery came in on us, and it was the Vietnamese artillery from a little provincial town down there, and it had a camp. And the artillery came in and it killed one of the sub-province commanders and several other people. Luckily, there was an old French tank, old French armored car between me and where the shells hit. So I was blown by the concussion onto the side of the road and into the jungle. I think I was on the radio at the time talking to province headquarters, and I think they just heard me screaming or something--it's kind of a blur. But I remember that. If I'd been a couple of feet away, I would've been gone. And those people were vaporized in the artillery. So we don't know if it was a mistake in the coordinates or somebody back at the artillery post was doing something for the enemy. That was just the way the whole war operated. You never knew who was your friend and who was your enemy.

And I remember one morning, we did hire Vietnamese women to work as house girls, to polish boots and do the beds and everything like that for the MACV compound. And I'd just come out of a meeting and said we're gonna go out to so-and-so and so-and-so and all this. And I come back and the house girl says, "Be careful today." And I'm going, like, how do they know where we're going?

We had a little town right next to us, which was Bao Loc, and it was, oh, I don't know, maybe 10,000 people or something like that. But I took the attitude that I live there, I'm a guest in their country. So when I'd go downtown to the village, I could go into the market and I would buy things. The Highlanders, the Montagnards, made crossbows and some weaving and tapestry for people to buy. And so, I mean, I knew the people and I could go in the bars and we'd be okay. I even went downtown for a haircut. And a Vietnamese haircut, he has a sharp razor. And a couple of my friends said, "Well, what if he cuts your throat?" And I go, "Well, he cuts my throat, and then what does that do to him? He's not a barber anymore." And they have a little stick like a chopstick and they go out and clean out your ears and all that. So they go, "Well, they could just stick that through your ears." And I trust the guy. I mean, it's like you have this mutual trust. And they knew who we were because over Christmas-- and that would be in '67-- the 101st Airborne had a unit there, and they came into town and wrecked everything and got into the bars and the

brothels and everything, the few brothels that were there, and just wrecked it. And they put the town off limits. And the townspeople came out to our compound and said, "Please come into town. We know you're not those guys." And the business was suffering also. So they knew enough that we, at least a lot of us, tried to have some compassion, being a guest in their country.

We were even invited once, across from the compound was Highway 20, and then that went down into sort of a gully and there were some houses down there. And the family, they contacted the MACV and said, "We'd like to meet some Americans." So about three of us went into this house and talked to these people, and they thanked us so much for being there. And that's a great risk 'cause they're just exposed. And the province is quite small. They know who you are when you go into a village; they're aware of who the Americans are. So it's like going into a small town. Everybody knows everybody else, and when a stranger walks in they know who that is. But they were very, very thankful. So a lot of people were thankful that we were there, and that helped morale a lot.

Interviewer

> How many were in your unit when you were in the Highland area?

Neil Olsen

That was one of the major problems is all of the units were undermanned. Oh, now, I'm forgetting how big a squad is. But let's say a squad is supposed to be 10 or 12 people. We had about seven. And that went on up into the platoon and up into the companies; we were way under strength on that. And that was at the time, too, where they were doing not entire units in rotation, which they've done later, but it would be an individual rotation. So in other words, I would be the new boy in this squad, and sometimes that works out, but you don't know everybody, you haven't worked with everybody and they look at you very suspiciously like you're the new guy. And until you learn the ropes and how things operate, the training you had back in the states isn't the same as what's going on in reality out in the jungle and in the war.

So you don't wanna be the one guy that screws up and gets everybody in a mess or gets somebody killed. Whereas, usually you'd take a whole unit; like, the 4th Infantry, when it did go over there in 1966, went over as a cohesive unit. They'd worked together, they knew what they were doing and they went over then. But then this substitution thing was, I think, detrimental. Also, you knew you were there for a year. And we had our little countdown calendars--365 days, 350 days, 100 days. And then after that you're called a short-timer when you've got a couple weeks in. And people become pretty useless because they're terrified of being injured or killed. So they won't go out on missions and do things. "I'm a short-timer. No, no. Leave me alone." So that's part of that. We were way undermanned, though, with the 4th Infantry in my opinion. And I'm a little cogged down here and I don't see the giant picture seen by the generals or the other people, all the brass that see the big picture. But I think the 4th Infantry Division was very poorly managed. It did do its job, but it could've done a lot better.

Interviewer

> Talk about the end of your mission over there and when you were waiting to go home.

Neil Olsen

Well, that was in July of '68, and I had just come back from R and R in Hawaii. I was on R and R for 21 days--normally, it's a week--because it took me so long to get back to where I was. Once you get to Saigon, then you have to catch a plane up to either Nha Trang or somewhere else, and then over to Bao Loc. And Bao Loc, since it was just a small little provincial capital, just with a single-strip airfield, there was not much traffic going in there. So it took me a long time to get back.

So by the time I got back from R and R, I was a short-timer. I had about, oh, I don't know, probably about four weeks, a month or something like that. And while I'd been gone, a lot of things had changed. A lot of the people that I knew had gone on back home to the States and there were a lotta new people there. And so what I mainly did is just I would pull guard at night and sleep during the day, and then I'd work on the language, the Jarai language. I did do up a little booklet of conversational guide for the MACV personnel so that they could use basic conversation and talk to the Highlanders. So that was my one publication at that point, the one product that I did I thought was positive. And so they made me graph that off and hand it out to people. So I kept myself busy with that.

And then when you leave, then they just send a helicopter, and I go up to Pleiku. And then you go through a lot of processing, and then they fly you down to Cam Ranh Bay, which is where the huge camp is where the plane takes you back to home, back to North America or the world. And we flew on, I believe, a commercial flight again that was leased. And we flew into McChord Air Force Base near Fort Lewis and Washington State. And from there, I went up to Sea-Tac Airport, Seattle-Tacoma, and took a plane down to Los Angeles, which is where I lived at the time when I got out.

The good news on that is that I was a two-year draftee, so I had about six months of training, including the vacation, the R and R, before going to Vietnam. I was in Vietnam for one year, and then I had six months left on my tour. And I asked for certain places, and I asked to be stationed at Fort Ord because that's close to home; that's a four- or five-hour drive down to Los Angeles. And I got that assignment.

And I came back with a heart-striped sergeant. So if you survived Vietnam, they gave you the E-5 or sergeant, which took years to do in the regular army. But I was a motor pool clerk 'cause I could type, and so it was good. Who can type? Yeah. 'Cause you knew that would be a nice job. So I was a motor pool clerk eight-to-five and then I was in charge in the barracks of a platoon. So I had to take care of these guys that were working in the motor pool. They were mechanics and things like that that had just come from Vietnam. And so we were assigned to another unit there. And it was an eight-to-five job. Which, I'd drive to L.A. and see things, and then I had relatives in San

Jose. And they sent us on one training school up to Fort Lewis for about a week to learn how to fill out some of the forms. So we did things like that. But that was very good for me because that was the sort of blowing off steam and getting used to life again in the real world, back in the United States. Some of the people that I know had been in combat up until about two days before they came into, like, Pleiku, and then they're shipped home.

And they're home one week after they've been out in the field in a war situation, and then they go home. And that's part of the problem of what happened with a lot of these guys. There was no transition. In other words, you're taken from a wartime combat situation, and then you're dropped back. And in the years that we'd been gone, things have changed. And we had the youth movement and all the things that were going on in the '60s, in '68, actually. I was in Vietnam when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I was in Vietnam when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, and then when Detroit caught fire and burned during all the riots. And I'm sitting here going what is going on? So we came back to that situation, so it was hard for many people. I have many colleagues that won't talk about Vietnam. They won't touch it. They don't wanna have anything to do with it. They don't even like Vietnamese food. I chose to talk about it and be interested in it because I am interested in the country and the people and the cuisine, and that's why I've gone back several times.

The first time I went back was so cathartic because I could see the country at peace. This was in 1991. And that was so important to me to see that. It was a poor country. Yes, they had their problems but at least there was no fighting going on, and that was so important 'cause the devastation was incredible in that country. Even in '91 when you flew into Ha Noi Airport, you could see huge, huge craters all over the place where the B-52 had done carpet-bombing. And the Vietnamese didn't fill them in. They're very pragmatic. They made 'em into duck ponds and fish ponds. But still, you could see all these craters everywhere. So that was essentially my experience.

Interviewer

> Did you go back to the Highlands where you operated there?

Neil Olsen

I've been back six times. When I went back in '91--and this was sponsored by the University of Utah Department of History--so I went back in '91. And I was very concerned how they would treat veterans. And I think there were about, oh, two or three veterans on the trip; one of my close friends was also a Vietnam-era veteran. And we went back and they greeted us quite nicely. And at that time, we were meeting with governmental officials and economics people and things; it was a very nice introduction to the country at a higher level. It was sponsored by the Vietnamese-American Friendship Association, so we went on these tours and things. And the Vietnamese people that we met said, "We didn't have a problem with the American people. It was your government that we were at war with." And I thought wow, they moved on. 'Cause we kept a little vendetta for quite a while until normalization in 1992.

But no, it was really good just to go back and see the country at peace. And in 1991, we did not go to the Highlands for a variety of reasons. In 1992, we did drive by where I had been stationed, and I was able to get out and look at the area and talk to a couple of people, and then drive by some areas that I knew.

And we saw the little house that MACV had been in now, and it's a car repair shop, garage. And in '68 it was way on the outskirts of town, and now town is enveloped it and Bao Loc has become this quite large town. And then in 1999 I was on my own and I rented a car and had some Vietnamese friends that were with me and we drove all over the Highlands. And we went back once again and I was able to spend some time on the ground walking around, again, at the MACV former compound, and it was still the garage, and then go down the road a little bit and see some of the places where I had been. So I've been back and seen things where I'd been stationed. So that was really cathartic, and I got a lot of closure out of that.

Interviewer

> Do you speak Vietnamese fairly well?

Neil Olsen

Not really. It's a hard language for Americans because none of the words are similar. Like, if you take a language like Spanish, French, German, even Russian, there's a lot of cognate or similar words. Vietnamese there are none. And then it's monosyllabic. Each word is separate, and then each word has a separate tone. And if you use the wrong tone, you're meaning the wrong word. So like for the word "ma," there's five tones to it. Each one means something different. I think one meaning means two, one means horse. So you have to learn the tones, and that's hard for a lot of us. I can't carry a tune in a paper bag, that's how bad I am. I did learn enough to converse with the people, but I really learned the Jarai language, which was mostly the language of the troops. So I became conversational in that language. And, of course, if you don't use a language, then you do tend to forget it. And then when I went to the University of Hawaii for graduate studies, I took two years of Vietnamese. So I can read the language, but speaking it, I'm not as fluent as I'd like to be.

Interviewer

How were you treated when you got home?

Neil Olsen

Oh, okay. Yeah. You hear all the horror stories. It goes the gamut from being called a baby killer and being spit on to guys buying you drinks in the bar and saying thank you. I had a relatively neutral coming home experience. Mainly I was in uniform on the plane from Seattle-Tacoma flying down to Los Angeles. And I sat next to a lady and she just asked me some questions. She said, "Thank you for going." And I didn't get into a lot of details, but people generally were okay with me. Nobody ever spat on me like you've heard these stories, or called me a baby killer or something like that. But no, I didn't really experience a lot of the negative things. I know some of my colleagues

had, and you have heard some of the horror stories. And I just don't know on some of those. But yeah, some people were treated badly.

And we came back, and there's of course the media, and especially the movies portrayed veterans as drugs addicts, psychotic, people that have a flash-point temper. And that's true because some of the people came right back from combat. They didn't have time to sort of reintegrate into society. And I think that was the military's fault. You don't train people to kill people and go out and do the things that soldiers do, and then have them come back and just drop them back on the streets, especially in the climate that was going on in 1968 and 1969.

I came back and went straight back to school and resumed my bachelor's degree in anthropology. And so I just went on back to school. And I was at what was then called San Fernando Valley State College in Northridge, California. It's now part of the California State system. But in '69, the entire school was shut down in February and March due to student riots. And I wanted to go to school, I mean, I'd done my thing, and so I really wasn't involved that much with the riots or the physical part of it. But I did do a little bit of speaking to people. I was asked to speak at schools, and sometimes I would speak at rallies telling what went on. And here I am, here's a veteran. Here's what's going on, guys. This is the thing. But it was very strange times for a lot of people coming back. It was hard for a lot of the veterans because nobody really cared or thanked us. We were sort of pariahs for a long, long, long time.

Interviewer

> Do you have any opinions on the war itself? Was it justifiable?

Neil Olsen

I do. No. The war was unwinnable. I could tell that from the third day I was in Saigon 'cause I've lived in other countries. My father worked for aircraft corporations, so we moved every couple of years. So I've lived in various countries, in Malta and Portugal. So I'd seen poverty and I'd seen other types of countries. And so when I got to Vietnam, I'm going like no, this isn't right. This was sort of a surrogate. You've heard there's a surrogate in the Cold War between the Soviets and the Americans. You got that feeling that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese would sacrifice anything.

And with the tunnels, they dug in with tunnels. Part of our duty in the 4th Infantry Division was to go and see after the arc light or the B-52 bombings, was to go look in the craters and see if there was any remains of the tunnels or any of the system that they had. Just across the border in Cambodia they found a huge hospital, underground hospital with a full operating room and everything like that. So these people were very, very industrious.

And in North Vietnam, all the industries had been decentralized. So they took all the different parts of the industry,

and they moved it out into outlying villages and out into the mountains where they were safe in caves 'cause there's quite a few caves in the type of geology of Vietnam. So, we couldn't have bombed them back in the Stone Age because they were essentially operating at that. And they got a lot of Soviet help and some Chinese help. But I don't see how you could win that because how would you occupy the territory? The people would dig in. To me, the analogy would be the Nazi Germany invading England. I mean, that would be fought tooth and nail to the last person, it just isn't gonna happen.

And the North Vietnamese General Giap was committed to literally putting in all the people till there was attrition going on. And they lost a tremendous amount of soldiers, and a different ratio than from the American troops. I mean, we could've bombed the North back to the Stone Age, which we pretty much did anyway 'cause I'd seen some of the stuff. Even in '91, there were still things being reconstructed after all that time. But no, I don't see the reason for that war. And it's like 58,000 people. It's hard to say did they die in vain for something that Kennedy and Linden Baines Johnson and Richard Nixon, "I don't wanna lose a war on my watch." So we kept going. We could've pulled out of there years before that. And so that's why a lot of veterans are still very angry and very bitter at going to something like that and losing our blood and treasure in something that's unwarranted. And that's my opinion.

Interviewer

> A lot of guys were angry because of the rules and restrictions placed on them. Did you find that to be true?

Neil Olsen

That was true sometimes in the field because you needed to call artillery in, you had to clear the artillery; you'd call in the coordinates of where you needed the artillery to be, and if it was not in a particular clearance area, then they'd have to call up higher and they'd go, like, "Well, what do you need the artillery for, and what's going on at the unit?" And you're sitting there going, like, "We're being overrun. We really need the artillery right now." So there were those kinds of restrictions. That was just my experience on the ground.

Now, there's a whole group of people that feel that they were working under restraints. Like Cambodia and Laos were both safe havens. And, it's like the North Vietnamese would strike us, and then they'd run across the border and then they'd sit there and do their thumb at us like, "Na, na, you can't get us," because we were not allowed to go into Cambodia. And so they had a safe haven and they could regroup and lick their wounds and come back another day. So that was one of the constraints, and that's legitimate, the safe haven thing.

But going up to the north and bombing the north, we bombed the north anyway. I mean, we really did hurt the north in North Vietnam with lots of bombing. I'm not sure what some of those people are thinking, that they could've occupied the country or bombed it back. I mean we bombed it so much that how much more could you bomb it? And then you need to occupy the country. And then again, you'd have the people against you. They're not going to

capitulate. So I don't see the logic in that myself. I just don't. It was unwinnable. And I guess they're thinking maybe we should've dropped an atom bomb or something on Ha Noi, but they were so decentralized, it probably would've just destroyed some nerve centers and that's it. That was my take on it.

Interviewer

We've heard that guys came back that are hooked on marijuana because it was so plentiful over there. Is that true?

Neil Olsen

It's true, very much so. And in the Highlands where I was stationed, it grew there. And so the Montagnards would bring over these huge plastic bags full of marijuana, and it was very cheap so you could buy that. So a lot of guys were smoking a lot.

I remember being on a convoy one time and everybody was so stoned that the convoy couldn't drive. We had to stop over at the side of the road for a little while. And I was just new in the country, so this completely blew my mind. I'm just going, "Wow, this is scary." 'Cause if you're in an altered state, you're not really gonna be able to perform as a soldier. But yeah, there was a lot of marijuana use. And in the urban areas, there was enormous amount of heroin, and you could go down and get that.

I remember being in some of these transit barracks with people, and we had a gentleman that would just sit on the bed and he was just sitting there sweating. And he'd just come back from downtown, and he'd gotten a couple of fixes. And he was being kicked out of the Army for being a drug addict. And there's a lot of people that said that there wasn't a problem with drugs in Vietnam. Well, maybe where they were that wasn't true but the only way to dull your senses from that was to get some sort of substance into you.

There was a division between--at least at MACV and where we were--the old timers would drink beer, and then the kids and people of my generation would be sitting there smoking joints. I did partake a little bit, but not much, and never, ever if I was gonna be on duty or doing anything to do that. And I never touched the hard drugs. But yeah, there was a lot of drug use, especially in the 4th Infantry Division.

And a little vignette on that, I was on a payroll tour from MACV down to Saigon--I was the accompanying person for the payroll officer, sort of a little jaunt for one day--and I carry the weapon 'cause I'm guarding the money. He's getting the payroll. And I had my 4th Infantry Division patch on it 'cause we were still assigned to the 4th Infantry. And I walked down the street in Saigon, and people would come up and go, "You got any good drugs," 'cause the 4th had that notoriety. And so it was kind of embarrassing, actually, 'cause no, no. But yeah, there was.

And there was a lot of alcoholism going on. And that's how you'd dull the pain of what you were going through in the

war. So yeah, a lot of kids just came back completely--once again, this is that period of time for reorientation and reintroduction into society. And you go, like, okay, you need to cut down. And for a lot of people, alcohol was a real problem. And for a lot of people, drug abuse was a problem. The Veterans Administration didn't jump into this for years, and just nobody wanted to touch it. So we had a lot of people, a lot of kids out there that needed a lot of help, that they didn't get it. And as you probably know, too, there's an enormously high suicide rate among the Vietnam veterans, too. And that's attributable to that.

Interviewer

> Can you describe culturally what the Montagnards were like?

Neil Olsen

Well, Vietnam, like the United States, is divided into several regions. And generally, people are thinking that the 17th Parallel Division there, which the Geneva Convention of '54 divided the north and the south, so you're thinking of it as being two countries: the communist north and the free south or whatever. But actually, there's three regions. There's North Vietnam, then there's Central Vietnam, and then there's South Vietnam. And that was from history, and they've always fought among themselves in the different dynasties over history.

And what happened in Central Vietnam is that it was truncated; part of it went to the north, part of it went to the south. And there's different food and different dialects. Actually, the people that speak Vietnamese in Hue, they actually need an interpreter for other people in the country so that they can understand them. They have, I guess, would be a really southern drawl or something like that. But the Vietnamese culture is very highly Sinicized or very heavily influenced by the Chinese. So it's very much Confusion, and a lot of people are also Catholic--that's from the French introduction--and Buddhist. And somebody could be all of those, and they do honor their ancestors. You might have somebody that's a good Roman Catholic, but then they'll go with their relatives to the Buddhist Pagoda for a ceremony, and then they'll go and light incense and put some offerings in front of a picture of their deceased parents. So it's a very interesting culture.

There's very much emphasis on the family. It's supposedly a patriarchal society, but the women actually run the show in the background. And so Vietnamese women are very, very forthright, and they know how to operate and do things and get things done. So that's the Vietnamese society, and it's very well organized, and that makes it very easy for, like, a central party or a one-party system to organize the people, as has happened in the north and then in the entire country after 1976.

The Montagnards, or Highlanders, are the ethnic minority. And they're the indigenous people that lived in Vietnam in the mountains. The Vietnamese moved into the area. They lived in the Red River Delta and they came south, and the movement is called the Nam Tien, which is the southward movement, and it's analogist to the westward

movement in the U.S. It's the same thing of concurring these lands, and they did the same thing and they pushed all the indigenous people out, starting about, oh, in the 1300s and moving on down.

And they got to Saigon and the Delta about the same time in the 1800s as the French colonialists did. 'Cause a lot of the Vietnamese Delta was part of Cambodia. So there's a lot of Cambodian people that live in Vietnam, about a million. So it's a multi-cultural nation. Again, back to the Montagnards, or the Highlanders, these people are Highland rice growers. And what they do is they have, it's called swidden, which is slash and burn rice. And they'll go out and chop down the forest, then they'll burn the forest and the ashes become the fertilizer, and then they plant dry rice. Then they harvest this rice, and then the land has been used up, so it lays fallow for a period of about--depending on the area and the soil--five to seven years. So this is where the Vietnamese picked up, oh, they're nomadic people. They're not. They just have a rotating crop system. And you find this also in other parts of Southeast Asia.

So there's the lowland rice people that are the main civilizations, which are the Vietnamese, the Cambodian, the Thai and the Burmese. Then you have the Highland people, which are all these different mixes of languages and cultures that live in there. Another group like that is the Hmong, and they live at the very mountaintops and they had a particular culture that was different from those at different altitudes.

But the people in the Highlands, all the books described them as a simple people and primitive and all that, and that's a bunch of crap because they're regular cultures. The people that I lived among were matrilineal, so it passed down the woman's line, and the boy would go to live with the family there, and they actually run the show. But they live in stilted houses, houses up on stilts. And there's a reason for that, because there's the mosquitoes. The mosquitoes apparently only have a vector of about three feet or one meter high, so if you build a house above it, then the animals are in pens below the house, and then with the bamboo floor, all your droppings can go down. And then what you do is your have your fires, like an hibachi, and it's got smoke in there and that keeps the mosquitoes out. Whereas the Vietnamese that come to the Highlands, they put their houses on the ground and they get malaria. So they're scared to go the Highlands because they don't wanna get malaria or evil spirits or something.

But originally, most of these Highlanders were animists, so they were ancestor worshipers. And they would have spirits of the sky, spirits of the water, they would have sacred forests. So there would be a cleared rice field all the way around, and in the center of that would be a grove of trees that are growing, and that was the sacred forest where the Mrabri, the spirits of the forest would live and they had longhouses. It's a similar situation to the Iroquois, North American Indians, where they had the longhouse and the extended families lived in the longhouse. And that's how they conducted their society. And there wasn't much organization above the village. People knew that they

were linguistically connected with other groups, and that's how they operated.

There's about 50 ethnic groups in Vietnam, and each of them is a little bit different. But there are certain areas where, like, you can say in the Highlands that generally people would have these stilted houses and they had ancestor poles in their front yard, and they would have the rice, and then they'd plant vegetable gardens everywhere. And they used water buffalo both to plow the fields sometimes, and also water buffalo was a source of wealth. So those were essentially the cultures. Very, very different than the Vietnamese. And the Vietnamese looked down on the Montagnards, much as the Americans have looked down upon the Native American indigenous people. So there's a lot of similar situations.

Interviewer

> How were you able to perform your duties knowing on some level that this was kind of useless?

Neil Olsen

That was hard for me. That was hard for me. But I knew I was there and decided to make the best of it. Because there really wasn't escape; if you went AWOL, where would you go, or something like that. Though that didn't run into my mind. But you sit here and you analyze the situation and you realize okay, I have to get through this. I don't agree with it, and I'll learn more about it. And the more I learned, all it did was reinforce what I had known. Because prior to that, I'd been pro war, I thought this was a good war for the U.S. I read all the news things. I actually believed everything the government told me at that point. I really, really did believe that, that it was a just war and a good war and that we were stopping communism from coming to San Diego. And so, about three days in I'm seeing the country, I'm seeing the people driving around in this big city, and then just sensing certain things. And there was just sort of a sixth sense that said to me, this isn't right. And that stuck with me and was only reinforced so much more during my year there.

Interviewer

> What were your thoughts when the withdraw came?

Neil Olsen

We needed to leave. And the only thing is that was so poorly done because there was a third force in the south that the U.S. could have negotiated with. And it was the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, which was the face of the Viet Cong or the National Liberation Front. And even though it was core controlled by the communists and from Ha Noi--now that we know--but there are a lot of other people that were not satisfied with the government that was in power with Thieu and Ky. I mean, the government was horribly corrupt, and that was one of the main stumbling blocks. And it was corrupt even when we would go in there and we'd say, "You gotta stop doing this. We're giving you the aid," etc. I don't know that we can account for billions of dollars of material and different things that went into that country. Maybe I'm being naïve here, but there could've been a rapprochement with the south. We could've had, like, a third government down there. But what happened is we pulled out, and Thieu made

that fatal mistake of abandoning the Highlands in March and April of '75. The North Vietnamese were not ready for that, but took advantage of it. And I know quite a bit about that because I have friends and colleagues that were involved in that.

And after the war, probably about 20 to 30 percent of the Montagnard population was decimated in that war and many of them, several thousands have come to the United States, so this can be corroborated. But there were some really bad, poor decisions. Thieu was not kept in the loop with the Paris peace talks. He was told here's what's happening. There was just a lot of posturing going on, and I think a lot of that can be blamed on Kissinger and people of his ilk. They were just looking out for strictly the U.S. government and a way to get out of there with a clean slate, if you could call it that. But no, the South Vietnamese people and the Montagnards were betrayed. And we could've done a lot more for them.

As far as the withdraw, I don't know what else you'd do. You go at a certain point with Vietnamization, all right, can they fight their own war? Some units in the Vietnamese Army were very, very good, and they held out to the very end. But when you're up against the North Vietnamese Army and they've been supplied by the Soviets and Chinese--they came in with tanks and aircraft guns. Remember the SAM missiles that knocked down so many of the U.S. Air Force planes? They were no match at that point because they literally ran out of ammunition through a variety of reasons, corruption, plus they just didn't have enough after the U.S. cut it off. So that's just a vignette of how I look or sense these events.