Robert Littlehale

Captain

United States Army

Military Physician

Teasdale, Utah

"Escalation"

Interviewer

Can you tell us your name.

Robert Littlehale

Robert Ferguson Littlehale, Jr.

Interviewer

Where were you born and how old are you?

Robert Littlehale

Well, I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, February 7, 1942 and therefore I'm pushing 70.

Interviewer

Tell us about your background before you went into the Army.

Robert Littlehale

Well, my early childhood was somewhat traumatic. Nonetheless I became an Army brat when I was four years old. My stepfather was an infantry officer who was in the Battle of the Bulge and got a commission after the war and was heavily decorated and stayed in the military and became an Army pilot. He was, in fact, one of the first evac pilots with helicopters, so called Whirlybirds in Korea as well as light fixed wing craft.

And as a result, I've been in my life in several different military bases: Fort Lewis, Fort Hood, Fort Bragg, Camp Drum, now Fort Drum in upstate New York, and in 1952 when I was ten, went to Europe in the sixth grade and came back here to go to college and during that time I lived in Stuttgart, Germany, as well as Frankfurt, Germany and went to Department of Defense Dependent Schools. And got a rather good education, but I was brought up in the Cold War, right in the Fulda Gap which is where the Americans expected the Soviet Army to come rolling into Europe, should they have that interest. So I was brought up with Stars and Stripes, American Forces Network Radio and everything stars and stripes forever.

I came back to the United States to go to college in Ohio and married my high school sweetheart when I was in my sophomore year and we had two children in college and then four years later in medical school we had another two

children and at that point the Vietnam crisis was almost at its peak and it was probably fairly inevitable that doctors were going to get drafted. It was very rare to get a deferment and therefore I went into the Army voluntarily to do my internship at Fort Sam, Houston, in Texas, at Brook Army Medical Hospital.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Robert Littlehale

That was in 1967.

Interviewer

So you're hearing about everything that's going on?

Robert Littlehale

Well, there were two things that happened. First of all, Brook Army Medical Center was where all the Army medics trained and all the medical personnel trained. And I, of course, was an intern and did a traditional old routine internship and I saw all the kind of stuff that was coming back from Vietnam as an intern; troubles with bizarre infections, hepatitis, not to mention the wounds and carnage from gunshot wounds and other traumatic events.

Interviewer

What about the psychological things?

Robert Littlehale

I didn't really experience much of that. I was so busy an intern, but I will say for me personally, it was a bit of a shock to see so much carnage. I didn't realize it at the time, but I think our medical schools, or at least my medical school really didn't train us for mass trauma. And so, having all that mass trauma coming back to a tertiary hospital from Vietnam I think was very disconcerting which is what I would say in retrospect. At the time I just plodded along and just did my duty.

Interviewer

When did you receive orders for Vietnam?

Robert Littlehale

Well as an Army intern at that time, because there was such a buildup in Vietnam as well as the need for specialists in the medical corps, the Army offered what was called an on-job training program and you had three choices of some specialty where you would work with someone who was fully trained, perhaps even board certified, and learn the rudiments of whatever that specialty was. And at that time I was interested in being a general practitioner in a small town. It was sort of my dream. So I picked orthopedics for broken bones, ear, nose and throat for kids and stuff and radiology so I could read x-rays.

Well, typical of the Army, I got to be an anesthesiologist. I didn't list it. It was down at the list, I didn't even know how

to spell it. Anyway, the bottom line is that I ended up having two months at the last part of my internship in a formal training program to train anesthesiologists and nurse anesthetists and then I spent another six months at an Army hospital in Fort Ord, California, where I worked with nurse anesthetists as well as anesthesiologists who had already been over there. And, again, it was a tertiary hospital so, yet again, I was dealing with intraoperative trauma almost entirely based on kids who had come back from Vietnam with need for more operations in a tertiary hospital. And then I got my orders for Vietnam. I knew I was going to go. It was inevitable. If you were in the Army and had any kind of medical training that's where you would end up.

And so I left for Vietnam in July of 1969 and I flew into Bien Hoa, which was a big airbase north of Saigon, which I think was probably the big military base. And I'll never forget getting off the plane and you could get that waft of warm, moist air, almost like a blanket covering you, but it had the smell of rotting vegetation, the smell of burning diesel fuel as well as carrion. It was quite a sensory impact.

And I was there for about three or four days till I got assigned to a hospital where the head anesthesia guy for all of the Army medical corps could evaluate me and then I got sent to the Central Highlands in a place called Nan Khe and there was a small surgical hospital there and that's where the 4th Infantry Division was at the time, I believe.

And they were very active so we had a lot of mass casualty situations. And wouldn't you know that as a partially trained anesthesiologist I was made chief of anesthesia. Typical Army, you know? And so anyway I was there and it was very traumatic, again, because not only was the hospital attacked with sappers, 'cause we were right next to heavy engineering battalion and the sappers liked to get into the wires and blow up all these big Caterpillar trucks and stuff, but also because we saw a lot of carnage. And all air vac'd in and it was quite an assembly, too.

And then from there I went up to the DMZ area and I was there for, I don't know, about seven months and I got kind of demoted I guess, and I became a battalion surgeon to a heavy artillery battalion. And I had a whole bunch of medics under me and had to go to various firing bases along the DMZ to do inspections and make sure they had all the right equipment and so on. And by then I had known that I wanted to stay in anesthesia and prior to going to Vietnam I had already gotten my residency, a formal residency, in anesthesiology at Harvard, at Mass General Hospital to be exact. So when I left the military from Vietnam, within 24 hours I left Vietnam, left the military and came back to the United States, all in 24 hours.

Interviewer

What day was that?

Robert Littlehale

That was 1970, I think it was July something or another. Left out of Cam Ranh Bay and got back I think in 1970 in

July sometime. I don't remember the date specifically.

Interviewer

How did you get to Vietnam?

Robert Littlehale

I don't remember the name of the airbase, but at the time since I was stationed after Fort Ord I went down to Fort McArthur which is in San Pedro, and it was the headquarters of a artillery command post for all the Nike missiles around Los Angeles called Fort McArthur, was named after Arthur McArthur, Douglas McArthur's father. By the way, they were the only two, father and son, who had the Congressional Medal of Honor.

And there I was the chief and the Indian for anesthesia. I was the only guy there. But from there I went to Vietnam I parked my family of wife and four children in East Bay area of San Francisco because I had relatives there.

And so I left out of, I don't know if it was Travis Air Force Base, but it was a big Air Force base in California and I had an interesting experience, I'm going to relate it to you. This is a funny story, actually. So, whole family's out there, my mother was there and I get on the plane and it was a big Pan Am plane, a very big one. And I'm sitting there and all of the sudden the door re-opens and a guy gets on there, an Air Force guy, "Is there a Captain Robert F. Littlehale here?" And I said, "Oh my God I've got a reprieve." And I raised my hand thinking God, I'm going to get out of this after all, at which point he said, "Sir, you have your wife's car keys." So, anyway one of the few humorous events. And anyway, we flew from there; I think we had a pit stop in Honolulu, in Hawaii and then went onto Clark Air Force Base and then on into Vietnam.

Interviewer

Were there other soldiers?

Robert Littlehale

There was nothing but military. It was a military cargo plane, essentially.

Interviewer

What was the mood?

Robert Littlehale

I think there was an underlying sense of apprehension, but it was covered by a jovial mood. And some guys had brought a couple of bottles of bourbon and gin and stuff like that. So they were passing it around relatively freely and so by the time we got to Manila we were really fairly schnockered. And, by the way, I had a bottle of Wild Turkey Bourbon. So, we managed to get through it all right.

But once that door opened in Vietnam, there was no joviality. It was like reality. In fact, I think one of the greatest cinemagraphic shots of that first awareness that you're in a surrealistic place is that opening shot of "Platoon"

where Charlie Sheen's character gets off the plane and a whole bunch of guys are coming out with faded uniforms and a thousand kilometer stare. That really captured the disillusionment of leaving -- or having been there and the experience of seeing it for the first time. Because by the time you're into Vietnam, at least for me, there's this thing of really not wanting to be there. And then there's a period of time, maybe after a month, two months, I think it probably varies with the individual and your assignments, is that you kind of settle in.

And this is your world and you really get into it and there's no more thinking of home or etc. And then, of course, towards the end it's like you get what they call the short timer syndrome is that you do anything to avoid any kind of danger. You know, you hunker down in your hooch or whatever and you just wait for that day and you're counting the days-- fifteen days and a wakeup. And then you get your orders and we, at least, used to take our orders and staple them onto a board for everyone else to see that you really were short.

Interviewer

So how did you arrive at the base?

Robert Littlehale

Well, no. I'm a little hazy about this; it was such a shock. But almost all big military units have what are called replacement units where people come in and they get kind of indoctrinated and they get their uniforms for the specific climate and so on. And I don't know if we got there by bus, but it was not by plane. We flew into this airbase and within half an hour we're at some replacement company and then over the next two or three days we wait for our assignment. We get uniforms, helmets, pots, and combat boots and all the things that you have to have to survive over there, except mosquito netting.

Interviewer

Talk about the first day you're really doing your job in Vietnam.

Robert Littlehale

Well, that didn't happen for another four or five days because I was at this replacement company and I don't remember the hospital, but what I do remember is that the living quarters were very primitive, and it was very boring and that that particular hospital was having its operating rooms renovated.

But about two or three miles away there was another surgical hospital or evac hospital, and I think that was the 24th Evac Hospital. And so although I was assigned to this one area, or this one evac hospital, because there was not any activity there because everything was being shunted away from it since its operating rooms were being renovated, I ended up going over to the 24th Evac on temporary duty. And so, I was over there for about three weeks doing anesthesia. And I will relate one very, very sad experience that I had there and that is is that after a couple days of just plain old indoctrination and getting a place to sleep, and so on, I began taking call.

And I remember being awakened like at one o'clock in the morning or maybe twelve, but at any rate, there was a need for an anesthesiologist so it was my turn to get up and go and take care of whoever the casualty was and which I did. And it turned out that it was a young, very attractive, Italian boy who had caught a round somewhere around his eye that went into his cranium and bounced around and, therefore, like any other wound, it's dirty, and had to have all that cleaned out.

So, I put the guy to sleep and did all the right stuff and then sitting there and the surgeon is doing his thing and I look up at the surgeon and I ask him, I said well, where did you train? Well, it turns out he was also an on-job trainee so he wasn't a fully trained neurosurgeon. Neither was I, and here we are working on this very handsome young man who would probably never be the same again after his brains got scrambled. And so I'm looking at some point in my boredom when things were very stable, I'm looking at his record and it turns out he's a young man from Brooklyn and I can imagine because he's Italian, he's probably got a bunch of younger siblings and they're all sitting at home having breakfast at that time zone in Brooklyn and I'm just thinking about how that family was so proud of their soldier boy and without realizing that he was going to come back an absolute mess.

And what further compounded my profound sadness -- this is tangential - for me, I think there's one point where you really do a lot of grieving and that handles all the grieving for the rest of the time. And this was my moment. And so I'm looking at this kid, I'm looking at his record and I'm thinking of his family and I'm thinking about two not fully trained people attempting to save this guy's life but to restore some kind of function. And I'm watching the irrigation fluid and the brain tissue that's being sucked up by the surgeon go through plastic tubing going to a canister which collects this detritus. And, of course, brain tissue floats because it's fatty; just like cream rising to the top of a bottle of milk. And I'm looking at this guy's brains floating in this pink fluid and I was devastated. I mean it was just awful and I will never forget that experience, of course.

And when the case was over I went back to my hooch, as we called our little living areas, and just wailed. I mean I just literally wailed for hours. And I think I probably even did probably a pint of bourbon just to go to sleep. I was just wracked with that thing. I wandered around in the early morning, around the compound, and I was just totally disassociated from the world. And that was my first experience with grief and I think not atypical of medical personnel; it may have been the one than to handle all the rest of the grief that I might experience the rest of my tour over there. So anyway, that was my first experience.

After that everything was like a blur. I mean I remember a few cases. For me, the residual of my entire career in Vietnam, but also in the military, was the overwhelming, profound, deep, and irresolvable sadness at the loss. It was just horrible.

I also remember another really profound experience when I was up in the DMZ. As I mentioned, I was a battalion surgeon, but my commanding officer said, you know, "God, you know, you're such a good doctor and you have all this experience," etc. And it was particularly manifest after some guy put a .16 to his chest and commit suicide and missed his heart simply because the heart was in systole, that is beating hard, and it just missed his heart and I saved the guy's life and sent him by helicopter up to I think it was the 18th Surgical Hospital in Quang Tri and my commanding officer thought I was wasting my efforts as a battalion surgeon with his outfit.

And so he went up to the commanding officer of the surgical hospital where I sent this guy and said, "You know, there's this really valuable anesthesia guy down there and he's being a GMO, can I send him up? Do you guys need any anesthesia?" So I got another temporary duty, or TDY, up to this surgical hospital, so I was back doing anesthesia again.
Interestingly enough, I was sitting there just shooting the bull with a bunch of guys and having a beer and someone just mentioned that a soldier had come in and -- this is when I first found out about the systole and the guy missing his heart and he said, "We had this interesting case where a guy tried to shoot himself and he survived only because his heart was in systole and there was some GMO down there who intubated him, put in great big lines and flooded him with fluid, etc." I said, "Well, I'm the guy." And so we all had a yuck about that so to speak.

Anyway, so I went up to that surgical hospital. But when I was there, there was another big battle somewhere and a fellow, a black sergeant -- again, another really attractive guy; I think he must have been an E-6 or 7, a real leader, ended up losing three limbs. And I was taking emergency room duty at the time and the guy came in with some of his compatriots and here's this attractive, really buff, great soldier, I'm sure, leader, losing three arms, and when I thought about -- because this is a time of racial strife in the United States, plus the military at that time also had a lot of racial strife -- and I'm thinking, here's a guy who gave it all for his country -- not all, but at least three-fourths of him and is going to go back heavily disabled, to a community of Americans who didn't accept the war, but won't accept him because he's black. And I had a real, I don't know, epiphany in terms of social awareness with that event. And that kind of shook me to my core.

But in addition to that, while I was there, my wife and mother of my four children; were sending me pictures of the marches she was doing for anti-war protesting in San Francisco. And I felt kind of betrayed by that. That was really another really traumatic experience of being there, doing what I was doing, experiencing all my stuff internally and externally and having pictures being sent to me about war protesting. Now mind you, I was brought up with the stars and stripes and all the hoorah of the military in post-World War II era, living in the Cold War, literally on the potential next front in Europe and so I was very patriotic. I was very enthusiastic about being in the military. I even

thought about being a medical corps officer.

But as I progressed from my first to second year and then finally my third year in the military in Vietnam, I could see that the leadership really suffered. I mean the NCOs had none of the qualities that I remember from post-World War II NCOs. I mean the NCOs then were really tremendous men. The men in Vietnam who were NCOs were not particularly great leaders and, of course, the officers were not especially great either, but moreover even their superiors were being mishandled by the politicians. And you know, you could see that. I mean people talked about that openly, about colonels or battalion commanders doing this, that and the other to further their career rather than to protect their men and being true leaders and looking out for them. And so that was a point of disillusionment.

And the other traumatic experience for me was a personal one and that is that while I was in Vietnam, my wife began to write and ultimately as her writing became a little more graphic, she told me that she was having an affair. And so I was out in the sticks and there was no way I could communicate with her without a two-week lap between when I wrote and by the time she received it and then another two weeks or a week or whatever to get it back, her response.

So, when I came back, I was a basket case to be honest with you. I was angry. I felt betrayed. I was frustrated. And I was very troubled. And I didn't know it. I mean I was a troubled young man. I really was. Vietnam blew me away. I left a big piece of my heart over there. I mean a real big piece.

And nobody spit on me when I flew into San Francisco, but I was wearing a uniform and prior to going to Vietnam, my wife and I used to like to go with some friends that we had to the Trident Restaurant in Sausalito. Well, turned out -- and I didn't know this at the time -- that they were very vigorously anti-war. So there we are, my kids come and greet me, my four sons, and then Marie comes and then we go to the Trident and we couldn't get served. They would not serve me. Yeah. Yeah, well I didn't get spit on or anything like that but finally we had to leave. We're talking about like half an hour to 45 minutes, and they were not busy. They were just pointedly not serving me, or us. And that was about it. But then --

Interviewer

Can you start back from when you return from Vietnam? And what was the plane ride back?

Robert Littlehale

Well, as my experience in Vietnam progressed and then I was sort of over the hump and toward the end of my tour, I became very angry. Not necessarily outwardly but I was really angry at what I saw other people experience and, of course, the trauma of the kids and so on, but also the incompetency of leadership. And I meant that too, referable to Washington who were directing the war. And I had saved up my R and R for about six weeks before I was not

only to leave the country but also leave the military and return back to the United States.

So I went to Bangkok with an artillery signal officer and so we were there for a week and I was mostly interested in the typical things of tourism. I was interested in the history and the culture etc., because that's one of my interests. But at the end of the week I said to him, "Steve, I don't think I'm going to go back." He said, "Doc, you can't do that, you can't, you've got to go back, it's in your orders." I said, "Well, I don't think I'm going to do that." And we shared a hotel room and the morning he was to be picked up and left all that evening and in that morning when he woke up and prepared to leave he said, "Doc, you just cannot do this. This is really not good." And I'm saying to him, I said, "Well, I'm gonna do it." And my thinking was well, I'm already at the DMZ which is probably the pits of any particular assignment you could get in Vietnam, I mean where else are they going to send me, to Ha Noi? I already had a job lined up and my residency training. I've only got six weeks in the Army and I just couldn't see that I was going to get in trouble. Of course, when you're young you don't think about risk. Well, nonetheless I stayed another week. And so I was technically AWOL and I very much enjoyed myself. And so I get my orders and I go to the debarkation place to get a flight back to Vietnam and there's this big, burly Air Force tech sergeant sitting at a desk and I show him my orders, he looks at that, he looks at me, he looks back down again, he says, "Captain, you're AWOL." And I said, "Yeah, I know, but can you get me back to Vietnam?" And so he did.

And I flew into Saigon instead of Da Nang and having never been there so I goofed around there for a few days and then caught a plane back to Da Nang and hitchhiked rides with deuce and a halves and this, that and the other and finally got back to my unit and there were absolutely zero repercussions, nothing. I think the executive officer just kind of went, like, "Wink, wink." So it was sort of an acting out. It was like an "F-you" move.

And then I had one other capability and that is I knew how to write orders so I managed to go in after hours into the personnel section so I typed up my own orders and left unceremoniously two and a half weeks before I was supposed to, went down the Cam Ranh Bay. I consider this a perk. And went down to Cam Ranh Bay where I knew I was going to be flying out and goofed off for a while and then caught a plane back to the United States. So, technically I only served two weeks shy of a year in Vietnam.

In Cam Ranh Bay the reality of coming home, dealing with an unfaithful wife, and the whole transition from three years in the military and all that and starting a residency and new family life really kind of hit me.

One of the things that I had done while I was over there was fantasizing about getting into photography as a hobby so I had all this very high end Nikon stuff. Now mind you, this is long before you had all of these little -- and so you had all this huge equipment and I never bothered to buy a bag for all this stuff. So I have all these lenses and stuff

and I'm protecting that against monsoons, my fellow officers and other thieves and managed to get it on the plane and it's just a pain in the neck, but it was probably the only residual that I had referable to Vietnam when I was coming back.

We flew from Vietnam out of Cam Ranh Bay into Okinawa. And then from Okinawa, went up to whatever the Air Force base is near Fort Lewis in Tacoma, Washington, near Seattle. And interestingly enough that was where my stepfather was first assigned when he came back from World War II and so that's where I did kindergarten and also my first grade. And so my military career so to speak started there, but it also ended there.

So within six hours I'd gone through the whole battery of what you got to do when you got out. No debriefing, just here's seven hundred bucks which is back pay, this is what you have saved, and we'll take the uniform. Medical exams, do you have any problems? Well, no. And that's it. And I was gone. And I was out.

And I had an old friend from high school who is also an Army brat. In fact, his father was a top sergeant, a really great guy. And I stayed with them for a couple days. And then got into my khakis and got onto a civilian plane -- you had to wear khakis to get a discount from the airlines. And so I wore those and that's when I went into San Francisco International Airport and that's where my four boys came to me and running, "Dad, Dad, Dad!" God, it was a marvelous moment. And then my wife came sauntering over at the end and then we went to Sausalito where they would not serve us because I was in a military uniform.

The next couple days were extremely traumatic. Not only because I was in real denial about this unfaithful affair that my wife had, but also I was really disoriented. I'll give you two examples. I was in the kitchen looking for a bottle opener and I couldn't find it and I got so frustrated I started crying in anger because I couldn't find a church key. The other was that my wife took me to a mall and I don't know what the pretenses were because I had no interest in a mall, but I had been in that mall before I went to Vietnam and she said, "I'll be back in a minute," and there was this big atrium as many malls have and I was there and I just panicked. I just had this really high anxiety. I was afraid for my life. I was totally irrational. I went and kind of, like, hid behind a couple of potted palms and just literally shaking and just having a heck of a hard time adjusting.

In retrospect I think I was just not used to large crowds. It was just a whole different world than I'd been in. And then I knew I had to get to Massachusetts, to Boston, where I was going to start my residency and again I was kind of, like, in denial, just about this affair.

And Marie had her friend come over as he was a Navy vet and he wanted to see some of the slides that I had taken

when I was in Vietnam. And I was almost oblivious to the whole thing but I do remember feeling really kind of strange and I can't describe the strangeness. But what I remember is she was sitting in the chair and he was sitting on the arm of the stuffed chair while I was sitting there showing slides. And then, again, I'm really beside myself -- I'm really not -- I'm in some other world. And I actually get taken over to his parent's house to meet his parents by her. I mean, really surrealistic.

Interviewer

This is the fellow she had an affair with?

Robert Littlehale

Yes. Yes. And I am totally out to lunch. Like I say I'm either in terrible denial or I was in a whole other world. And I think in retrospect I really had one hell of a case of PTSD. And so my whole world revolved around leaving a world that I had come to feel, not safe in, but where I could relate to. Coming back, I could not only relate to her, but I couldn't relate to anything. And so I retrospect that whole trip to the mall was for her to go and tell him that she's made the decision to stay with me. I'm supposing this. She and I never talked about that in any depth. But at any rate, the bottom line is that we piled in the station wagon and went up the Pacific Coast Highway to see some friends up in Washington state and then traveled east on wherever the big highway is up north going through Chicago, New York, and on to Boston. And so immediately coming back, I'm certain I had an acute case of PTSD and was totally other worldly. But one of the things I remember about traveling from Washington State to Boston was the tape "Tapestry" by Carole King.

Interviewer

Start over and say that again.

Robert Littlehale

So the metaphor for what was going on between her and me was playing the cassette "Tapestry" by Carole King over and over and over again. And to this day I can't stand any song out of there, even though Carole King was one heck of a songwriter and I loved her songs. But the other figurative thing beside those songs was that the wife kept moving farther and farther and farther away from me till she hugged the door. And I was heartbroken, beside the whole other PTSD stuff. And do you know that for a year and a half, almost a year and three quarters, we never had sex from the time I got back, that's how strained the relationship was. And I remember lying in bed -- we had a double bed -- and it was just awful. And that really further traumatized me.

So I start my residency and you know I was very, very good at what I did and had experience in Vietnam. I was troubled though. I couldn't sleep. When I was on call, I roamed the hospital and I couldn't sleep because I was having a lot of nasty dreams. I remember once waking up in a hospital mattress which, of course, has a plastic cover on it, in a pool of sweat, literally, it must have been at least half an inch of sweat because of horrible, horrible flashback nightmares. I was lonely and when my training program was over, I think someone labeled me as a

brilliant anesthesiologist but a troubled young man. And it was oh so true. I had anger; I had homicidal anger. One of the things that I think part of the lexicon of Vietnam was the F-word as a syllable. "Out effing standing, no effing way," and so on and so forth. And so that F-word was perfect for expressing disgust and anger and I was into it. I was angry and anyway it was just a manifestation of PTSD. And then the wife attempted suicide so that was another traumatic experience during all of this training that I went into.

So, my first few years back from Vietnam were exceedingly traumatic. I had never been a smoker or a drug user or anything like that, although I always liked to have a beer or something like that after an athletic event. But I did discover pot. And pot really paradoxically saved my life. And the reason it did was it allowed me to really suppress, repress or otherwise minimize the number of terrible flashback dreams I had. And the dreams were thematic. I had several themes in those dreams and they were all related to betrayal, physical danger, frustration, and fighting. And so I discovered that pot, a couple tokes before I went to bed, helped me sleep more comfortably, at least I thought, because I didn't have the terrible dreams.

But I think most people who go into medicine as physicians and perhaps other medical specialties also, and I don't mean specialties as medicine, but nurses etc., -- I think there has to be a strong ego. And I think I had as strong an ego as could be and I was able to really suppress my pain, the hurt, the anger, the frustration, the sense of betrayal and try to act like a normal person. Well, of course you can't do that forever and stuff comes out sideways. I mean I was sarcastic. I said mean things to people that didn't deserve it. I'd get angry at just any little thing. And so as time went on, I was able to suppress all those feelings and act, air quotes, "normal." But, of course, it's only a ruse because you can't keep that kind of stuff bottled up.

About 20 years later, it was in 1999; it was November the 11th, it was Veterans Day. I was living in New Mexico and I heard a helicopter go by. And, of course, helicopter in my life meant air evacuees coming in and it meant a lot of work and a lot of trauma and the smell of blood and guts. And so I decompensated. I was home alone and I just became psychotic. I mean I was in another world. Again, you know, afraid, anxious, hiding behind potted plants waiting for someone to kill me and wanting to get them first to throw the so-called first punch. And at that point I really realized I had a problem. By then I had enough awareness.
I had enough insight into my anger and I went to a VA center and started talking to an ex-Marine combat vet, a licensed clinical social worker and we started talking. He said, "Well you have a heck of a case of PTSD." I said, "Well, what do I do about it?" He said, "Well you talk."

And so, over time I got into the VA system and began to talk and meet other vets, and by this time I was divorced from my first wife and remarried. But coincidently, that first experience of really having a break with reality, my

second wife and I, after five years, had a child, my fifth son. And I'd wake up in the middle of the night and I'd have my hands around her neck from these nightmares that I was having. She had to move into another bedroom because she was afraid for herself as well as the baby and I started drinking. I started drinking pretty heavily and it got me in trouble and so I really had to deal with that.

And so I was at a point in my life where I could retire. But I got into the VA and started working on the PTSD but I also realized I had a problem with alcohol and at that point I started doing AA stuff, actually went to like a Hazleton place for three months to get my act together and to learn more and more about alcoholism, etc. And I kind of got it together, I had a relapse, but I finally got it together.

But, nonetheless, by then my second marriage was not healthy. And because my father had died in Ohio and my wife was from Ohio and my first family children were all disbursed around the world, literally, I wanted a family for my young son and so we moved to Ohio where she was from and as the only sibling who ever left her native soil, was the right thing to do because of the extended family for our son. But it was fairly clear that the relationship couldn't survive and I wanted to come back to the Southwest because I felt spiritually connected here.

And so she and I took the high road. We talked. Our prime interest was in the quality of our son's life and we didn't want him to be in the middle of anything and so we did everything ourselves and we separated. Separated and divided all the property and so on and so forth and I moved here and she's still there. And we have a very good relationship. We're good friends, I stay in her home when I visit my son which is very frequently and my son and I are very tight. And my older children with whom I have reconciled with, because they were a part of this whole -- not only the military stuff because I was in the military when they were little, but also when I came back. There was a lot of anger and stuff and we had our issues and so we've all reconciled.

Interviewer

What were those issues and how old was your oldest child when you returned? And how did you relate to your wife knowing that she acted in war protests?

Robert Littlehale

All right, I was a father when I was 18, 19, 21, and 22 and so I had four children all of whom were either in the fifth, fourth, approaching kindergarten when I returned from Vietnam. And by virtue of the fact that their mother -- this is an interpretation -- by virtue of the fact that their mother was not really attentive because of her own issues and so on, the older boys, particularly, were kind of wild. They were in trouble in school, they were failing, they were running with the bad crowd and I think at that time they were also probably smoking pot. The fact of the matter is is that when I came back that whole family was really out of control. So I had a really, really difficult time. In fact, my oldest son was exceptionally resentful to have any kind of bounds or limits put on him because he'd been without

bounds for a long time.

However, it was also apparent that they had trouble in school and we when moved to Newton, Massachusetts, where we lived while I was going my residency at Harvard, the school system which actually made Time magazine as one of the best schools in the country, which is why I moved there, or lived in that particular community, discovered that they had dyslexia. And so they were illiterate in the fifth and fourth grades. And they were street-wise, they were wild, and here I am working 12-hour days, hardly capable of really being much of anything other than a disciplinarian which was difficult to do with only 12 hours at home, most of which was for sleep, and a mother who was really screwed up. So we got into some real distinct discussions that were manifest by a lot of anger and whatnot. And so my eldest son and I were very estranged for a long time. In fact, I think when he was like a junior in high school, maybe a senior, he confronted me about going out on a school night and we actually got into a fist fight.

Interviewer

What were the discussions with your wife about her protesting?

Robert Littlehale

I didn't have any discussions with her about that. Because by the time I came back I was really anti-war and so I didn't have any real issues with that. I was more concerned about my emotional health and the anger and everything else I had. Of course I was angry with her, but I wasn't angry with her post-Vietnam because I actually agreed with the fact that we needed to get out of Vietnam. But when I was there I was very, very unhappy and was saying in letters, "How can you do this? And here I am over here representing our country, being exposed to danger and you're not supporting me, but rather an anti-war movement," and I felt betrayed.

Interviewer

In '75 when you saw the helicopters coming out the embassy and everything ending, what were you doing?

Robert Littlehale

I still have the newspaper from the Boston Globe, the picture of that tank moving into the American compound and I was ambivalent for two reasons. One is that I wasn't there anymore and two, I was really wrapped up in my own issues, not only with trying to become the best anesthesiologist I could be, but also dealing with a family that was exceedingly disruptive and dysfunctional. So I had to be ambivalent and I was. On the one hand, I felt sad that the United States had really lost the war, if you could call that a war. And secondly on the other hand, I was glad there would be no more carnage. Because I've never seen carnage like that afterwards, before or after. So for those reasons, I was glad it was over. And that got into my career, the dysfunction between myself and my wife remained even though there was marital counseling and this, that and the other and the marriage lasted for 32 years. How it lasted for 32 years beats me, but ultimately we divorced.

Interviewer

Do certain sounds still trigger emotions in you?

Robert Littlehale

Still does. It still does. I hear a helicopter and I don't have a typical flashback, but it brings back the notion of what the helicopter symbolizes and because I think I'm pretty well compensated on all fronts, I recognize it for what it is and say, yeah, that was a pretty shitty period in my life, however, it is over. I'm capable of dealing with the world. I feel that my soul is very comfortable with who and what I am and I feel very whole. I do not feel incompetent in life spiritually or emotionally. I think I've really got my stuff together as we used to say. I got my shit together. And I do.

Interviewer

Were there moments where you could hear a helicopter from a distance and you had to prepare yourself for what you were going to experience? How long did those surgeries last?

Robert Littlehale

Well first of all, this may have been the first traumatic, emotionally traumatic experience that I had and this was when I did that little TDY thing over at the 24th evac in Bien Hoa. And so some medical service lieutenant was showing me around the hospital complex and the hospitals were really an assembly line.
What you had was a heli-pad, an emergency room, corridors that led to an operating room and then off to the side along this corridor were like the labs and the blood bank and this, that and the other, x-rays, and then on into the operating room. I mean it was rare that you had somebody come in on a helicopter with a bad case of hepatitis; it was always trauma--and then to the operating room, recovery room, and then onto ward.

So it was a very, very effective assembly line. And so I was being shown the start to finish by this lieutenant and we came around a corner and there in a room about the size of, oh, maybe 24 by 10 were at least two dozen American soldiers, and what I saw was khaki, white gauze, red blood, and what I heard were (sound effect) sounds of gasping for air and so on. And when I looked around there I realized that these were all wounded soldiers and there wasn't a single medical care person anywhere near them. And I thought how bizarre because I'd never seen anything like this before. So here you have these colors and bodies going up and down with the sound of gasping and heavy breathing.

So we walk around this area into the emergency room and there was a nurse there, an Army nurse, and I was introduced and so I said, "What's all that about?" She said, "Well they're expectant." And I had never heard that term before. And I said, "Well what does that mean?" She says, "Well, we expect them to die." And I remember distinctly I almost fainted -- this rush of blood leaving my head and neck. I felt cold and clammy because I realized that these kids were not getting any kind of compassionate care, but it also brought to me the immediate reality of the triage system where you had to make decisions with mass casualties as to who could survive and who wouldn't and if they weren't going to survive because of a wound that was expected to be terminal, they got shuffled off. It

was the most inhumane thing I think I ever saw other than just frank terrorism in Vietnam. So I recall that with a lot of grief, even today. So, yes, we had a habit at the 17th surge, or wherever it was, the 8th surge, I can't remember, but it was up in An Khe.

And we had sort of like Quonset huts and we used to sit up there and watch the valley down below because we could tell when a batch or a squadron of helicopters would be going up and we knew a battle was going to be going on because you could identify the Hueys that were equipped. And so we call that roofing. So we did a lot of roofing during periods of quiet and we could hear the choppers go out and we knew what that meant. And so, yes, we could get prepared for incoming casualties. And then we would hear the air evac guys coming in and so everybody would, like zombies almost, just in this routine habit of going to the operating, getting in this, all the surgeons and nurses and everybody would just go there and then the first casualty would roll in. And so we knew how to handle mass casualties.

I remember several times having four or five operating room tables going simultaneously and directing in this very, very large cement floor Quonset hut, which was the operating room, simultaneously directing and helping all the anesthesia personnel take care of these casualties, including one that I was doing. And I would take one that, for example, I could do a spinal on if they had just a leg wound and so they were fairly stable from an anesthetic point of view. And then I'd go and help someone hang blood and do this, that and the other and we would stay up multiple hours just dealing with this and, like, 25, 24 hours. And very little sleep. It was busy. Of course, at that time, you didn't really think much about yourself. I mean you were so busy trying to save lives and stabilize physiology.

Interviewer

Did you have access to the news? Did you know what was going on back home?

Robert Littlehale

No, I don't recall much of that. I mean, of course, you know, the famous "Good morning, Vietnam!" I don't remember anything like that. I just don't remember AFN over there. I don't remember listening to news. My wife, excuse me -- I have to itch my nose. My wife would send me batches of the San Francisco Chronicle. So I would get the news four to five weeks late, but I didn't have any interest in that. I liked Herb Caen who was an interesting columnist and writer. And I think Hunter Thompson was writing at that time, who I've always liked; poor soul. But in the moment, news from the United States, I don't recall any of it. I think most of us may have been divorced, but I don't know that. I just don't have a big recall.

Interviewer

Can you talk about the support of female nurses in the operating room?

Robert Littlehale

Well I can talk about my affection for nurses (laughs).

Interviewer

Can you say something about their service?

Robert Littlehale

I felt so strongly about the nursing corps and had so much admiration for their selfless service. And I think they were as traumatized as anyone because, first of all, they're female and although there are male nurses and there were there -- and I don't mean to be sexist when I make this remark, but I think the nature of a female nurse is nurturing. And I think that her heart must really have had a difficult time dealing with the emotional and physical and probably spiritual trauma of her codery of servicemen under her care. I felt so strongly about the nursing corps that I went to the inauguration of the statue in the mall near the Vietnam Memorial for women who were in Vietnam and still have tremendous respect for them.

And as it happened, I knew Lynda Van Devanter who wrote "Home by Morning" which I think that's the name of it. Who wrote the sort of the seminal book on the experience of being a nurse in Vietnam. And I think they were as traumatized as anyone. Now, mind you, as an anesthesiologist not only did I employ nurse anesthetists, but I had nurse anesthetists who helped train me. So I have a tremendous affection for nurses in general. And I also spent 12 years of my career as an intensive care expert, which really the nidus of care revolves around critical care nurses. And I have profound respect for nurses.

I can't speak on a personal level of any experience between a nurse and a patient and what that might have been like for them. Because I think that when the trauma is over and things are stabilized I think partying was generally the rule. It was wild and wooly, drinking, dancing, whooping and hollering because it was an escape mechanism. And I think a lot of humor, a lot of practical jokes, anything to divert one's self from the realness of the carnage.

Interviewer

The "expectant" category, was that a continued policy?

Robert Littlehale

As I say, it's not something I've talked much about and all I can say is is that it was profoundly sad. I think in being a critical care expert and dealing with life and death in the most extreme examples in hospitals, most of which were -- in fact all of which -- were in Harvard hospitals, I have to say that the emotional impact of death and dying is really a profound spiritual event. And I don't think one ever really can effectively compensate for the experience of being really profoundly immersed in that, but what does come out of it is the goodness and the general well-being of a dignified death. By that I mean there is closure with the family and the dying person; the medical staff, the nursing staff and all the health care providers are all in unison to provide care and comfort for the dying individual. That didn't happen in Vietnam in these expectant, so it was inhumane. It was really out of the ordinary. I don't know what happened in 9/11 at the Twin Towers. I don't know anything about the medical experience there and I don't know if the hospitals in New York City, Manhattan, were overwhelmed and they had to triage, but I have to say that any

time where there's no humanity involved in a death, that it has to take a toll on one's soul. It creates a tremendous amount of sadness. And I think it's a sadness that stays with you. I don't think you can easily resolve it. In fact, I don't think it is resolvable.

Interviewer

You said you wanted to talk about the mortuary personnel.

Robert Littlehale

This is all through reading and experiences that I've had with my process of intellectualization. I did mention that's a coping mechanism that I have used for my whole experience in Vietnam was to try to understand the meaning of it all. And somewhere in my reading, I read -- it may have been "We Were Soldiers Once and Young," but anyway there were a few segments somewhere along the way that I read about the mortuary personnel having probably exceptionally deep trauma. I mean, imagine dealing with unending casualties coming in body bags and being so disfigured that they weren't recognizable; pieces of human beings.

And then also imagine that whole processing from the time a person is dead to being transported back to the United States and all the personnel that had to deal with that whole assembly line of terminal life. It has to have been traumatic.
I know MP's were part of that whole deal and I've read segments somewhere along the way again in my reading, that were involved in the transport and safety of body bags suffered a great deal.

I think the men who went from home to home with the bad news have to have felt profoundly bad because it's grim business, literally and figuratively. It's very, very grim to tell a family and watch a family simply crumble. Can you imagine telling a young boy that his father is dead in a foreign country or that he's missing? Just pretty profound.

Interviewer

If there was a North or South Vietnamese who came in triage, where were they in line in triage?

Robert Littlehale

The triage system really revolved around the needs of the service. So that really meant taking care of the most urgent, life-threatening cases. Now, in the civilian community, we still have a form of triage in a sense in that you have a limited resource called the operating room and you have limited personnel to service in that operating room. And so you have three categories: you have urgent or life-threatening, which is life or limb-- save a life or save a limb. That was the most acute.

Then you have urgent which means you've got maybe a 9 to 12 hour wait period before it becomes a true emergency or, therefore, life or limb. Then you have elective. And so obviously the most critical were those with life and limb and so they would go first. And Americans, of course, were always accepted as the first in line. However,

and I had a personal experience with this where a North Vietnamese regular colonel got whacked and had to have an abdominal operation and he was saved and went ahead of the line because they wanted to interrogate him. And yet at other times -- and I anesthetized him, and that was another traumatic experience for me -- but there were other times where, for example, in the Central Highlands where there may be long lulls in military combat activity and so there were Vietnamese personnel that worked for the Americans on the various bases and outfits and we had, for example, a case of diphtheria come in. We had a little boy who ended up getting some piece of shrapnel. We took care of him. We had a pregnant woman and we did a C-section on her. And so if there weren't any other pressing needs in terms of getting soldiers back to combat or to their unit, we would take care of civilian personnel.

Interviewer

Tell me about anesthetizing the Vietnamese colonel.

Robert Littlehale

Well I was a non-combatant, even though I saw combat. The bottom line is is that we are taught -- at least I was taught in my medical school to have little judgment about who and what a human being was. The human tissue was sanctified and that you just took the Hippocratic oath and it became really meaningful. Well when you're in a foreign country and you see your boys, your fellow citizens if you will, and soldiers, getting banged up by an enemy it can't help but affect you emotionally and, therefore, there is a, I think a rising pool of dislike, hate.

I mean, for example, I had a dartboard in my hooch that had a picture of Ho Chi Minh on it. And, in fact, when I recently got to Vietnam I was taken to the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh and I had some real mixed feelings about that. They call him "Uncle Ho." And I had some real feelings about that. Anyway, so the generic issue is, for example, the servicemen it would be the gradual -- maybe acute -- stripping away of morality and ethics and it became a matter of survival. Now, when you're into a mode of survival you don't have moral and ethics. It's really reptilian. You're really dealing with the limbic system of the brain. There's no cerebral involvement. And I think even though we were medical personnel, the fact is is that we had some resentment, too.

And so for this colonel to come in, I had these mixed feelings. I thought well I'll just give him an overdose and that'd be the end of that. Well, I couldn't do that in good conscience so I put him to sleep. What was traumatic is that when I started to put the tube into his trachea so I could breathe for him while he was under and paralyzed, he had this incredible regurgitation of these massive white round worms in the back of his throat. I've got to tell you, that was the most disgusting thing I think I've ever seen. Even to this day, I'll never forget that, all these in the back of this guy's throat. Because, in fact, the Vietnamese people at that time were exceptionally ridden with parasites. And they were probably malnourished, too, particularly the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese because they didn't have the resources. They were used to hardship. A lot of Americans -- I mean we got our pallets of beer and our steaks every now and again. Although I will say that I missed ice cream and pizza. That was the one thing that I never got

while I was in Vietnam that I'm very fond of.

Interviewer

Tell us during the R and R fun time, what did you do?

Robert Littlehale

I went to Hong Kong and Thailand and to be honest with you, I was really interested in culture. I always have been. It was a thing that I had to suppress to go to medical school that is take --

Interviewer

Were you interested in the Vietnamese culture?

Robert Littlehale

Absolutely. In fact, when I was in my post in the northern part of Vietnam, I did a lot of what they call MEDCAP, and I don't remember what that stands for, Medical Civilian Action something. But anyway, I'd take a corpsman with me and I'd go into these small little farming villages and I would try to find someone there who was interested in medicine and on occasion I'd find someone who not only could speak English, but was also partially trained as a nurse. And I'd have, like, office hours if you will with her helping me. Of course, the kids couldn't speak English, but they'd bring in patients from the village and I would see them, attempt to make a diagnosis on what limited time I have. She would tell me what they needed and, quite frankly, it was very, very, very, very satisfying to be able to interact with the people who I liked. I really like the Vietnamese people. I did then and I do now.

And of course that whole thing was just a ruse and the reason is is that although I knew a little bit about pediatrics and stuff, it was really a great way for her village to get medicines that she knew how to dispense. So I'd bring in quinine, I'd bring in penicillin and tetracycline and bandages and I was essentially stealing from Uncle Sam so to speak to shuttle some of those supplies so that her people could be taken care of. And so I had several villages like that and I really enjoyed that a lot. It was a humanitarian effort, actually.

Interviewer

Tell us about when you went back. When did that happen?

Robert Littlehale

This year. I left Salt Lake City on the 24th of June and flew into Bangkok, spent the night there and then went into Ha Noi, all by plane. And there was a group of about 15. The reason I particularly took this tour group, it was a tour group, was because it was advertised as an in-depth tour of Vietnam. And so I flew in to Ha Noi and had to endure the cold-faced, stone-faced, Vietnamese military who ran the airport, got through -- unfortunately lost my luggage -- but got to a hotel in Ha Noi. And Ha Noi was very distinctly different and the reason is it was old, it was not bombed. Narrow streets and the capital, of course, of Vietnam as well as being pretty strongly militaristic.

And I did not encounter a single episode in my two and a half weeks of anything that could even be seen as anti-

American. I found the Vietnamese people from Ha Noi all the way down the Saigon in the Mekong Delta to be exceptionally polite and very, very nice. In addition to which the food was all fresh, didn't get a single case of anything nasty like Uncle Ho's Revenge or any of that. And the food was absolutely delicious.

First of all, the Vietnamese have 54 different ethnic groups and I spent time in an indigenous family up in the Hmong tribes up in the mountainous area of northern Vietnam. It was only five miles from the Chinese border, interestingly enough. And also a family down in the Mekong Delta-- did an overnight there. We traveled by it's a bicycle rickshaw, cyclos. And of course everything over there is done by a Honda 150 and you could see five-by-six stuff loaded on the back of a -- they're terribly ingenious.

The Vietnamese are exceptionally hard working. I'll give an example. We did a little boat trip up the Perfume River, which is near Hue, the former imperial capital. And there were barges in the center of the river, old Vietnamese boats that you see, for example, on Apocalypse Now. And they were dredging the center of the river of sand, putting it onto this other riverboat, pumping out the water. And then they would take the boat over to the shore and there would be four or five guys and they would all be shoveling the sand out by hand. A dump truck would come up, five guys shoveling the stuff, the sand, into the back of the boats. Just hardworking. God, they're hard working. They're also very inventive.

The Vietnamese economy is doing well and I'll tell you what my experience was in terms of the people: I was so glad to see them have their country back. I had no interest in anything military when I was over there. I was just strictly interested in the culture and the people. And we took an overnight train from Ha Noi down to Hue. And it wasn't the greatest experience because the boat, it was very crowded and it was very dirty. It was only the real negative experience that I had in terms of this tour, but the train goes along the coastline. Now, I should say Vietnam is essentially an S-shape and there's a mountainous spine which is to the West and then they had a general slope in sand going all the way out to the South China Sea. So all the population's essentially along that coast and along the gentle slopes. And that's where the trains went and that's also where Highway 1, which was the great north-south road went.

So I woke up about four o'clock in the morning and we were going through where Ho Chi Minh was born near what formerly was the DMZ, Dong Ha, where I had fire base in medics and Quang Tri which was also where I spent a lot of time when I was doing anesthesia on TDY. But I knew that as we went down within about a half an hour I was going to be able to see the coastline or looking towards the mountain where my battalion was.

And so I'm sitting there about 4:30 in the morning and we're going by this place. Of course I didn't recognize

anything, but I recognized the mountains where I had fire batteries and medics stationed. And it looked so tranquil at 4:30 in the morning. All the little villagers that may have been along there were out getting ready for their day. The rice paddies were well-kept and I didn't have any negative feelings. I thought this might be the time that if I'm going to have something going on it would be about this time because I spent a lot of time in the countryside. That's where I was doing all my medical stuff with the villagers. And yet all I felt was this sense of satisfaction that this country was at peace, that the people are hardworking and they, by God, are very attractive. They're small, they're petite, but they are just very attractive because they're well proportioned, but their faces are all like little China dolls, very, very light Oriental color. Very, very attractive faces as opposed to, for example, to the Thais who are also petite but have courser features. The Vietnamese are extremely attractive people.

Interviewer

When you stepped off the plane there as a visitor, what was that like?

Robert Littlehale

No smell. Just as hot, just as humid. None of that nasty smell of the war. There was no smell of war. There was no rotting flesh; there was no rotting vegetation. There was no diesel fuel. I mean, mind you, they have polluted air because they're driving little tiny motorbikes all over the place and that's their mode for transportation. I wouldn't say refreshing, but it was nothing as morbidly sensuous as in Bien Hoa when I first came in the country.

Interviewer

What was going through your head the second time?

Robert Littlehale

It's hot and humid. I can't wait to have a towel to wrap around my head to wipe the sweat away. But the other thing is that I noticed the airport was really, really stark. And the other thing I noticed was very few people spoke English, very, very few people. And so negotiating money--you can't buy Vietnam money except in Vietnam. It's not on any exchange outside of Vietnam. And it was really, really difficult to communicate and it was also very militaristic. There were uniform people all over the place and they were humorless. And I thought that was really, really interesting. I thought well, by God, I'm in a communist state 'cause it is a communist state, albeit, they are capitalistic. The fact is is that these people were just really straightforward, humorless and without facial expression. I mean they were just like robots. But once we got on a bus and went into Ha Noi, it was a whole different thing.

On the way I saw nothing but construction, huge cranes. I mean the place is busy --re-building or enjoying some kind of economic revival. And then downtown Ha Noi was busy but the people seemed un-phased. They just went about their business, lots of motorbikes.

Interviewer

Tell us what you did with these three other veterans and what you shared with the schoolchildren about your experience.

Robert Littlehale

The retrospectoscope referable to Iraq was inoperable. Therefore we went into Iraq -- this is my personal opinion -- erroneously. And I think essentially there were a few items in the Patriot Act that really were bothersome. And one of those was that the military recruiters were given the availability to the demographics of high school children. And so it was a distinctly one-sided militaristic advantage for people who were into imperialism, which means our government. And there was no counterpoint capability. And I belong to the Veterans for Peace. I did belong to Veterans of Foreign War and all that other stuff, but I find them just to be a bunch of alcoholics, to be honest with you and too right wing. And by the way, those are generalizations.

But Veterans for Peace really were for peace and after the Iraq war began and we invaded, I think there were a lot of people who really did understand that we were not prepared to deal with what was coming and that we also have become peaceniks, if you will, using an old term, that is we don't think violence has ever, will now, or ever create a positive outcome.

And so the Veterans for Peace got very active in going around to college classrooms and some high school classrooms to discuss the human costs of war. And the best way to do that, in our collective opinion, was to put a human face to the experience because teenagers really don't have a sense of future. Their neurobiologic system cannot absorb risk for future stuff, they're just not developed, which of course, the military takes advantage of in their recruiting. And so we would go into classrooms at the Utah Valley State College, or now UVU, Salt Lake Community College, some high schools, and literally talk to students of teachers who were favorable to our cause and we would talk about our personal experiences referable to war and about the human carnage that occurs emotionally and spiritually in people who have been to war. And the reason, of course, was to try to attempt to bring a higher consciousness to the whole notion of kids who are vulnerable to the militaristic recruiting.

And so that's how I met Rick, Larry. And I've only met Lou Downey once and he had gone to Vietnam, I know, before I did for a sense of reconciliation and he and I and Rick and Larry actually went out to a charter school in Provo and talked to a class. In fact, they've done it once again, I have not, but I was there for the initial thing. And it's very rewarding to see perhaps a slight improvement in the consciousness of kids that war really isn't all that it's cracked up to be. It really isn't. There's nothing heroic about it. There's nothing romantic about it. And I know that because I've been there, but also because I was brought up on all those John Wayne movies in World War II, and immediately post-war. I've seen all of those.

Interviewer

World War II seems heroic?

Robert Littlehale

It was heroic because it was a righteous war.

Interviewer

Vietnam?

Robert Littlehale

Political war. You know I think from a historical perspective I think we've repeated this on more than one occasion and that is we think that if we can put in a puppet and create a government that is in our favor that we can change the minds and hearts of the indigenous people. It worked in the Philippines because Marcos was fairly effective, even though brutal, in establishing a country. But Vietnam was so wracked with corruption. Iraq is going to be wracked with tribalism and religious differences and Afghanistan is absolutely totally corrupt. And we've done the same in every one of those countries and it hasn't worked. It's only worked once. But it's a part of our foreign policy and it will continue as long as we have a militaristic and imperialistic point of view. And I think we do.

Interviewer

In Vietnam did you have any relationship with field medics?

Robert Littlehale

Absolutely. I had medics under my direct control, I guess. I was their officer.

Interviewer

Tell me about that--your relationships with them.

Robert Littlehale

Well, I worked my way through medical school. I worked my way through college and I have worked in every stinking job in the medical industry from orderly and poop cleaner-upper to becoming a leader and president of a medical staff and so on. So I know the insides and outsides of the healthcare industry, if you will, but that also includes the military.

And my style of leadership has always been to really know my personnel and to be their leader but without being their friend. And so for me the most important thing is endure whatever my troops would endure, number one, and be willing to do exactly what they did, number one. And number two, to really look out for them, but without being patronizing. And so I had a solid bunch of medics. They respected me and they worked hard for me.

In an artillery battalion you had what were called firebases. So you had a headquarters with maybe a firebase or a couple weapons there, but then you had other firebases scattered around that may have been 20 to 30 miles apart. And so I had to organize their supply system and make sure that they were well taken care of, not only with supplies, but that they got out on a regular basis and got a beer or two every now and again and so on, but also that they had the proper training.

And so I would go with a guy who was a mechanic for these large, large guns and would get in a jeep and he would go up to take care of a gun and I'd go up and meet with my medics. And we'd stay overnight and we would have

beers together and just talk stuff, guy stuff. And they told me this is what they needed and so on and so forth and I attempted to get that back to them. I would make several trips through hostile territory to get to these firebases, but also to go to Da Nang and get the supplies that I needed. So I worked hard.

I did have one negative experience, actually two. One is that I had an Afro-American sergeant who had what I guess you might call short timers syndrome. And what I meant by that is that he really was unwilling to do any kind of work. He had very few leadership abilities and when I came into this battalion, the aid station was awful. It was filthy, unsupplied. My medics were really poor soldiers. They were slovenly and there was no organization in terms of sick call or anything like that. Well I got that straightened away rather quickly. But he came up for evaluation and I was pretty frank on my evaluation and all the NCOs in this battalion -- well, not all of them, but a lot of them -- really were upset that I would hammer this guy for his attitude and his lack of leadership, but I didn't care. I wanted an outfit that could do what it was supposed to do and that is take care of people who are either sick or injured.

And had it not been for those good medics that I helped train, or re-train I should say, I don't think we would have been able to save that guy's life who shot himself in the chest. I mean my guys came and got me directly, they were already on their way with a stretcher and all the stuff that I needed. We got there to wherever it was and this was about like half a mile away and I'll tell you what, we were running with our hearts pounding, and by God, we as a team saved that guy's life. And if it hadn't been for their capability, that would not have happened.

When I was in the Central Highlands there was a very, very nice young man from -- he was a Cajun from Louisiana, Boudreau, I think. And anyway, he got into heroin. And there were some drug problems over there, of course, because of the lack of morale, but anyway he was an OR tech and he was a very good one. And he was a good guy. I liked him a lot. And when we had lax time we had football teams and sort of like the movie "MASH," I was the quarterback, I was Hawkeye. But anyway, he was a good guy and some of his compatriots, other guys in my operating room area -- since I was chief of anesthesia I had control over them, too -- would come to me and say keep an eye out for so-and-so and I think, etc. So they trusted me.

And one day he overdosed and so they came and got me, said, "Doc." So we went up there. I saved his life. He would have died. But I intubated him. He got shipped out of there 'cause he definitely had a problem with drugs. So I had I think really good relationships with my underlings because I respected them and they respected me. I mean it was just my form of leadership, I think.

Interviewer

When you got back did you ever talk about your experiences?

Robert Littlehale

I don't know about other physicians. I've only maintained relationships with a few people I knew over there and they've long since... But I think the relationships that one has in Vietnam are more likely than not to be transient. It's like the ebb and flow of the ocean washing away the sand of the sea as a relationship.

And I think, for me, the reason is -- and I may be intellectualizing here a bit so please forgive me -- but I believe that it has to do with the fact that it is very difficult to find the language to express one's experience. And more often than not, Vietnam veterans -- and I don't know about the Iraq and the Afghanistan veterans -- but more often than not the Vietnam veterans would tend to isolate. For example, I find it very, very difficult to talk to Rick, Larry and anyone about my experiences. I know what theirs are, they know what mine are, but we don't get around and talk about that stuff.

However, it is important to relate to another veteran in the process of healing. The reason is is that it's an experiential thing. And because we don't have the words for what we've been through, there is this bond of experience that transcends language. It's also an issue of trust. How can I trust you if you really have never been there and don't know what I've been through? How can you possibly understand the profundity of my experience? And so there is this general lack of trust. And so one of the things with PTSD, for example, that I know as a physician is that talk therapy is one of the most helpful things. I know a vet who does two PTSD talk groups per week and has been doing that for years and years, perhaps decades, because it is one of the most effective ways, for him at least, and probably for those who are in his talk group, to be able to get it out, so to speak, and to create a sense of healing.

Interviewer

You said that PTSD is deep in the soul and the soul never forgets. So one will always have PTSD?

Robert Littlehale

I think one could say that PTSD is a spiritual disease. And the reason is--is that in order to be a full human being or whatever we call that internal sense of rightness/wrongness, spirituality, soul, whatever -- is imbued with a couple of traits, one of which is compassion and empathy. We have this need to interconnect with each other as a species. I think it's built-in. I believe it's a part of our DNA development over a millennia -- hundred thousands of years. In order to kill another human being, one has to overcome that specific taboo which is we don't want upfront and personal conflict. It's not in our collective tribal nature, if you're looking at it animalistically. And from a spiritual point of view, in order to kill another human being, you have to dehumanize them. You have to make them less than, therefore not deserving of. And it's a part of the whole western culture of bad and evil, or good versus evil. You know, there are those who are good and they deserve and those who are bad and evil and, therefore, they don't deserve. And it's part of our 10,000-year-old western cultural myth.

So PTSD is, in fact, a spiritual disease. It's other things, too, but when they did the DMSO-4 or whatever it is that creates that diagnosis, they left the spiritual part out. So, if the soul is immutable, that is not corruptible, the soul cannot forget what you have done that is evil that is not good. Because evil could be defined -- this is, again, my opinion and my statement -- and that is evil is defined by the lack of being remorseful for having done something outside tribal bounds, or human bounds. And so, not having remorse is a rare entity, I think, in human beings; I mean Hitler, Stalin, serial killers and so on. But honest to God, the basic human being suffers. And his soul doesn't forget that he's committed a very deep human DNA-based act of unsoulfulness.

Interviewer

What about the people who have nothing to be remorseful about?

Robert Littlehale

Oh, I don't know about that. Because if we're a tribal bunch and we see atrocities being committed in the name of politics and we all suffer our own particular horrors, so even if you're a non-combatant you can still have PTSD.