Stu Shipley

Marine

Salt Lake City, Utah

"Escalation"

Interviewer

Tell us about your early life and getting into the service and the early part of your career as a Marine?

Stu Shipley

Sure, I'd be happy to. First I want to say thank you for the opportunity for this, for me to shed a little light on this war. My uncle was 27-year Marine and I idolized him. He was my mentor and I was very taken by his stature. He walked into a room and it was like he demanded respect. And I thought someday I want to be like that, or I'd like to be like that. And so I had this in my mind for a long time, even when I was 10, 11, and 12. And I knew I wanted to be a Marine because that's what my uncle was and he said that was the best there was, although all the services are wonderful. So I chose the Marine Corps, quit high school in the 10th grade and had my mother sign me in. I knew I'd go to Vietnam but I knew I'd get the training I needed. And I was actually excited. I was a baby, you know, 17, you don't know a whole lot at 17. You think you do but you really don't know much. And I talked to my uncle at great lengths and he told me the kind of training I would get and it would be tough and it was. But I did really well in boot camp and I pushed myself really hard and graduated with honors out of boot camp and then went on for more combat training after boot camp. Back then boot camp was 16-, 17 weeks, it was a long time. But I was honored to go in and graduated with honors. I made Private 1st Class, I was a squad leader in boot camp and it kind of pumped me up. I was somewhat of a--not a good kid in school, so to speak, and I felt like I was making something of myself. And the Marine Corps gave me pride and made me feel worth something. And that suited me. It hit hard in me and it suited me well.

Interviewer

At the young age of 17, and having kind of a bad childhood and maybe undisciplined, did you realize that you were going to have to be disciplined and regimented when you joined?

Stu Shipley

I did. My uncle laid it out pretty hard for me and I was somewhat of a juvenile delinquent and ran away a lot and that kind of stuff; a lot of trouble in school. But I found I was starved for some guidance. Didn't have a father so when I got to boot camp, drill instructors are your father and they were tough. I got beat up pretty good a few times when I didn't quite perform like they wanted me to. Well we all did. But for some reason or another, it affected me not adversely but in a good way. And I saw what I could become and I realized after four, eight weeks in boot camp

that these guys were all working as a team, we work as one. And when you go in you're just an individual, you don't think of all that. And they make you work together. And I saw the benefit of the camaraderie and the brotherhood and it shined on me greatly and I realized I could do things that I didn't think I could ever do. And so it pumped me up, it made me feel like, "wow, there's nothing I can't accomplish if I really put my mind to it. " And I think it put me on a better path. And I think even though the war was detrimental to me in a lot of ways, I've struggled greatly with it like most Vietnam vets have their entire life, I do believe that what we went through and what I went through has helped me become a better man.

Interviewer

Now what happened after you got out of boot camp?

Stu Shipley

I went to a training called ITR, Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Pendleton. And there you get more basic training, more combat training. We started in with some jungle warfare training because the conventional combat training that they usually gave was like stuff from the Second World War and Korea. But that was being phased out so we did more jungle warfare training in the hills of Camp Pendleton. So it was a lot of overnight, two and three nights out, just in the dirt, in the mud, and the rain. You could put in for what they called escape and evasion school where you become a prisoner in a prisoner of war camp. That was pretty rough. Of course Marines were running it, but they treated you like a prisoner and you had to try to escape and if you escaped you had to stay escaped for 24 to 48 hours without being caught. And that's no food, no water, you had to figure out how to do it yourself. So it was some extensive training and it was there that they attached me and the other men in our weapons platoon to specialize in machine guns, mortars, and rocket launchers. And that's where I learned the ins and outs of those weapons. Take them apart blindfolded, put them back together. A lot of live fire, we did a lot of live round firing at night and daytime. So it was just a lot of combat training that we received there and I believe it was about a month and a half's worth, almost two month's worth of that at ITR.

Interviewer

And those machine guns have a tracer round?

Stu Shipley

Yes, every fifth round is a tracer round, it's tipped with I believe white phosphorus. And so at night fire it's pretty amazing. The M60 machine gun which is what I humped around in the jungle, plus the ammo--I think it was like 28-point-something pounds as my memory recalls, pretty heavy weapon to be packing around. Deadly accurate. Accuracy up to 2,000 yards, and it's still used today I believe in a lot of different operations. It's quite a weapon. And then we didn't really get the mortars, the 60-millimeter mortars, we had 81s or 80 millimeter mortars. And they broke out the 60-millimeter mortars from the Second World War and Korea because they're short and easy to carry through the jungle where the 80 is much longer and much heavier. And so we had to have special training on those because we got those in crates and they were full of Cosmoline and they were dated 1941. And I thought, "my

gosh, what is this?" But it was quite a weapon because you could carry it and stick it on a lump or a stump or a log and just pop a round and then shoot it off. It had a little plate on it. It also had a bipod that was kind of heavy. But when we used it in the jungle in Vietnam we just carried the tube and just stuck it on the ground and you'd just take your arms and adjust the elevation with it that way and an assistant gunner will throw down a round and poof. But the M60 was my specialty along with sniper. It would give us 200 rounds per minute and it was pretty deadly. Pretty deadly. The problem with the M60 is how had to hump a lot of ammo because you'd go through it quick and it was heavy.

Interviewer

Were you aware of the attitudes about the war when you were at Pendleton and before you went over?

Stu Shipley

Yes. We all read the papers and the magazines and watched a little TV when we could. And we realized there were hundreds of thousands of people totally against this war. Of course we're in the uniform, whether you're Army, Navy, Air Force, or a Marine. Didn't matter. We raised our hand and took an oath. Sorry. And that oath was forgotten in this country. And for the men who preceded us, who laid down their life to give us freedom. And that's all we cared about and that's all we knew. So for us we didn't pay a whole lot of attention to it. It hurt us, it hurt us greatly. But this country is free because of the men that have fought to keep it free. And freedom isn't free; it has to be fought for. And so many men before us have given their all for this so I felt honored and privileged to do my part as we all did. And we didn't pay a whole lot of attention to the rhetoric from the newspapers. We knew we were doing what was right or we thought we were doing what was right in our heart. And when you raise your hand and take that oath, it's pretty solemn. And even though I was a 17-year-old kid, I took it very seriously as we all did. Was the war good? I don't know. I really don't know. But we did what we had to do and did what we were told because we took that oath and that means something.

Interviewer

So after you left Pendleton and took that secondary training, what happened after that?

Stu Shipley

Well, we boarded and ship in San Diego. We actually went over to Okinawa on a ship called the USS Breckenridge. I'll never forget the name of it. There was 5,000 Marines on the ship and probably five or six hundred civilians on the top deck and we were not allowed on the top deck. But it was actually a half-civilian, half-military kind of a ship. I don't know, it wasn't a destroyer or a battleship. I'm not a Navy guy so I'm not quite sure what kind of ship it was. But it was 23 days on the ocean to Okinawa for staging to go to Vietnam. When we got to Okinawa we debarked there and was stationed right there outside of Kim Village with the large Marine Corps base there and we did another three to four weeks of extensive heavy jungle warfare training in the jungle there which was just like Vietnam. And we were getting pretty nervous at that point because we knew we were getting close. And they gave us live ammo instead of blanks for training and so we knew we were on our way. And from there we got on--I'm

trying to think of the name of the ship from Okinawa. I want to say it was the USS Enterprise; I was on that carrier for a week. I believe it was another ship, it was a different ship and I can't remember the name. And we sailed to the south side of Vietnam, right outside of Da Nang. And we actually went down the ropes, off the side of that ship like you seen in all the documentaries of the Second World War, into the peter boats, those ones that land on the beach, and I was pretty scared. We all were. It was a pretty eventful day and we hit the beach right outside of Da Nang; the whole battalion hit the beach. I don't know how many boats there were, hundreds. And I thought back to the documentaries I watched on Iwo Jima and Normandy and I knew there'd be a lot of guys that wouldn't make it off that beach. We did receive heavy fire getting off the beach and took up position on the beach outside of Da Nang. We were the first, I believe in the history books--there's a large, large book at one of the big book stores called "Vietnam" and the 2nd Battalion 3rd Marine Division was the first combat battalion to land in Vietnam, in-country, and I was among those and I felt greatly honored to be the first.

There was other people there, other Air Force people in Da Nang, the Air Force base. And then as soon as we hit the beach we moved inward and took up a perimeter around Da Nang Air Force Base. And it was hot, the middle of summer, I don't remember the month. And we took up a perimeter around Da Nang Air Force Base and dug in and built our sandbag bunkers and stayed there for a couple of weeks there that I recall, a couple weeks to a month or so, maybe better than that. And we received a lot of fire upon entering the beach and lost some good men that day and that afternoon. I remember Da Nang Air Force Base, having a few helicopters, a few jet fighters, but it was almost like a dirt runway. It was nothing. This is Da Nang Air Force Base? It was just like a little tiny airport. And of course the engineers were working on building it all up, bringing in more jets, more helicopters, more supplies. But that was my first day in Vietnam. We actually climbed down the ropes off the side of the ship and it was very choppy and a couple of guys fell in and we got them out and we were pretty scared.

Interviewer

What year was that?

Stu Shipley

1965. I believe it was August. June, July, or August, I can't remember.

Interviewer

I imagine being in Okinawa and that summer humidity was quite a contrast.

Stu Shipley

It was and I think that's why they kept us there for three or four weeks for some heavy jungle training, we spent the whole time in the jungle and you just drip with sweat. I mean the humidity was 100, 110 percent. And it didn't matter, you just couldn't stay dry and it was just as bad, if not worse when we got to Vietnam. The humidity in the jungle, it's atrocious. And not to mention the 100-degree weather during the summertime. So you never wore T-shirt, you never wore shocks; most of us never wore skivvies or underwear. It would chafe you so bad you'd get rashes within weeks and you just can't stay dry. There's no way of staying dry. It was pretty brutal during the summer. Of course

so was the monsoon season, that's the other end of the spectrum. I never seen rain and wind and cold. It didn't snow there but during the monsoon season in Vietnam you earned your money. At that particular time I was making $75 a month. I was a Private 1st Class. But back then I thought that's pretty good money for being in the jungle.

Interviewer

You made a perimeter around Da Nang Air Base, what happened after that?

Stu Shipley

We stayed on that perimeter probably a couple of months until we had more relief troops show up and relieve us. We needed to get further out in the jungle. And while we were there we patrolled day and night off the perimeter of Da Nang Air Force Base into the villages and out further into the jungle and it was there we received a lot of resistance. Because the Viet Cong were dug in pretty good around Da Nang at that particular time and it was very sporadic. The problem I learned quick-- we all did--that this was not your typical war like you see in the documentaries in Korea, Second World War, Germany, France, Poland. Once you took ground in Vietnam and stayed there a few days or a hill or a village or an area, once you took that ground and cleared that of ammunitions, you're looking for weapons, ammunition, food storage, and the Viet Cong, the enemy. Once you took that ground you stay there for a while and patrol that area, once you leave, they take it back up again. They come back in. Very depressing. There was no line. There was no line of defense. They're on that side, we're on this side. If you were in the jungle they were over there, they were over here, they were behind you. And you might clear the area for a mile or two but once you leave and go on to another hill and they helicopter you to another spot 10 or 15 miles away, they come right back in again. And it was very hard to understand. We lost 25 guys in the last two weeks taking this hill and this area and then you pull out and you move up 10 or 15 miles and then you get radio control come to you a little bit later and you hear somebody, some messenger comes through with a message, they're back at that hill you just took and lost 25 men. It's hard to take. It was like you didn't gain any ground 'cause it was so thick in the jungle. It was kind of hard to take.

Interviewer

So would you just go out on patrols basically?

Stu Shipley

It was patrols day and night, 24-hours a day. You didn't get a lot of sleep. Sometimes you'd go out with a squad, usually a squad. Nighttime in the jungle, it's very difficult to describe that. You can stand outside your house here in Salt Lake somewhere or anywhere you are in the United States or you can be on a camping trip somewhere out in the mountains, but you can still see light from the city far away. Somewhere there's some light. In the jungle of Vietnam, it is pitch black. I've never seen darkness like this. So consequently when you're on patrol with your squad, 10 to 14 men, you got to be touching 'em all the time in the front of you or hanging onto a belt loop or hanging onto a strap off their pack and you just creep through, just little shuffle steps as quiet as you possibly can because you can get ambushed real easy because you can't see where you're going. You don't turn on flashlights.

That's just saying, "here I am, I'm a marker." And if you're smoking you cover it up with your helmet because that little red dot, it's a good target. But a lot of patrols, did a lot of patrols.

And then in the daytime patrols, the daytime patrols were more search and destroy, what we called a search and destroy mission. So you'd go sweep through these villages of just huts and dirt floors and unmentionable living conditions these people lived in, the South Vietnamese, I just couldn't understand how these people were so poor and no education. Children running around with the scalp disease because they don't have clean water. They brush the slime away from the stream to take a drink and it's just loaded with malaria and bacteria and giardia and it's how these people lived. And of course they ate nothing but rice. Never saw meat. They had water buffalos over there but those were sacred and they didn't kill those for meat and did use those in the rice paddies. Very few chickens and very few dogs because they ate a lot of dog meat for protein. A very poor country where we were. Of course you know, you've got big cities like Saigon and Da Nang and there were some big cities and they were very modern now. But where we were, it was extremely just dirt-poor people.

And they all greeted us but you never knew who was Viet Cong and who was the good person. They were supposed to carry some type of ID, but as we'd sweep through these villages, the men and the women would come up to you--even older men and older women and bow to you and thank you and you'd give them some of your C-rations or something that you had in your pack that you could spare them maybe a bar of soap. They never even saw a bar of soap. I gave a kid a little bar of soap that was sent to us by the hotels and motels from the United States, they sent us a big shipment and we passed them out in the villages. The kid took a bite of it, thought it was candy and didn't have a clue what it was. But at night, when they were greeting you and saying how happy they were to see ya, at night they'd come and fire at ya. So it was very difficult to decipher who was the Viet Cong and who was not. It was a difficult choice and some of the choices that were made over there were horrible as far as men and women go, and kids. But it was what it was. It was war.

Interviewer

What was the average time you'd stay out on a patrol?

Stu Shipley

It was usually, if you went on a night patrol, you left at dark and came back at dusk, in the morning, at dawn. So it was 10 to 12 hours you were out. You didn't cover a lot of distance because you couldn't, because you couldn't see where you were walking. So there was trails of course that they used to carry their water and their supplies. Tried to stay on the trails as much as you could and you always had the point man and he had the worse job of course because he was leading everybody. And if you were going to get shot or killed or wounded, usually the point guy because the first guy to get it. A lot of booby traps. We lost a lot of guys, guys that would step on mines, punji pits. A punji pit is a hole in the ground and they sharpen up bamboo stakes and they drive it in the ground and they defecate on the stakes and urinate on the stakes and then you fall through and it goes up through your foot and gets infected pretty quick. And they were from 10 to 12 inches and they even had pits that were 8 to 10 feet wide,

10 feet long where five or six guys would fall in and it would just impale 'em. They were pretty genius people setting up booby traps. A lot of bear traps and what they call swinging pineapples--it's a log stuck with bamboo spikes. You trip the wire, it swings down off a tree and shish kebabs three or four of you. They were very ingenious Viet Cong war. Because they didn't have a lot of weaponry and so they used everything in the jungle they possibly could to take us out and they did a good job of it. They did a good job of it.

But the average patrol at night was 8 to 10 to 12 hours. A day patrol was about the same, it was from dawn till dusk, till dark. But we did a lot of village sweeps and hopefully along the way helped some people, the village people, because they were pretty poor and they were scared of the Viet Cong also. And the Viet Cong threatened them, of course, with their life. And when the Viet Cong would come into the villages and hide weapons and food so they could hit and run. Hit us and run and then come back and still have food. It was very difficult to decide is this rice for the villagers or is this for the Viet Cong. It was tough. It was tough.

Interviewer

Can you tell us about some of the most unique or dangerous patrols that you were on?

Stu Shipley

I remember, there's quite a few in my mind but it was really hot and they helicoptered us out of our area to about 10 miles out where the Viet Cong were dug in pretty heavily; they told us to expect heavy resistance. And so they helicoptered our whole company, 200 guys, and I remember setting down in a rice paddy and jumping out. And you jump out in them rice paddies and just sink clear up to your thighs, your waist, it's just mud. And there you are in the middle of a rice paddy, bare open and bare ground just waiting to get fired upon. And you're scrambling trying to reach some cover. So two squads swept through the middle of the village. My machine gun squad was on the left flank of the village and the other weapon squad was on the right side. So you don't see a lot of men because the jungle's thick there, the bamboo, trees, all their huts. And so we're sweeping, we're just staying in radio contact. And we're sweeping along, we're walking along a rice paddy trail, they're all over the place, they're hundreds of thousands of miles of 'em. And we haven't received any fire yet and we've been walking for 30, 40 minutes and very slowly sweeping through the village. The left flank and the right flank had to kind of wait for the interior two squads to sweep through the village because they're searching everything. And so we took about a 10-minute break and sat down. I sat down on the edge of the rice paddy trail, hung my legs over it, put down all our gear and they told us to grab a can of C-rations and wolf it down real quick because we probably wouldn't get much more food. So I broke open my 1941 C-ration box. They'd sent us C-rations from the Second World War and I saved my C-ration top box that says "C-rations." Now they're called MREs--meals ready to eat--back then they were called C-rations. And I saved my box top on it, that says, "Beefsteak, potatoes and gravy, 1941." So these were combat rations that we were eating in 1965, dated 1941. Let me tell you, they were hard to choke down. So I shared my beefsteak, potatoes and gravy with a buddy of mine who was sitting next to me on the rice paddy, he was my ammo carrier; he was carrying ammo and his rifle. And we got up and as soon as we got up we got hit with incoming fire. And it was

very extremely heavy.

You can hear bullets flying by ya and the dirt was kicking up all around us where they'd missed. And I heard screaming from inside the village, we had some guys getting hit. And there was a hedgerow about 50 yards in front of us, a very thick hedgerow--there's a lot of those in Vietnam. So the fire was coming from the hedgerow but you couldn't see anyone. We were getting heavy fire. So we all hit the dirt and then tried to find some cover so we hit the ground and the firing was really intense, very loud. And it probably went on for two or three minutes which seemed to me like two days. And guys were getting hit, you could hear 'em scream. So we were ordered to stand up and jump into the rice paddy to get down into the mud to get more cover because we had quite a few men getting hit. I stood up and my buddy stood up behind me and there was eight or nine more guys behind me and we scrambled off to the side of the rice paddy trail and I felt someone touch my shoulder and I turned around... and my partner had been shot through the heart. And he touched my shoulder and I turned around and he looked in my eyes and said, "My God, I'm dead." And he fell dead at my feet. And I drug him off the rice paddy trail and held him and kept returning fire. It lasted another 20 or 30 minutes and then the fire stopped and we lost about 30 men in that hour. And then the helicopters came in, the medevac helicopters, and we took the bodies and they put them in body bags and hauled the wounded out and we continued on, advanced another 25 yards.

There's a small hole in the hedgerow and we didn't know because we couldn't see how much--whether we'd taken out any of the enemy, it's very demoralizing because you couldn't see 'em. But we put out a lot of rounds; we returned fire heavily so we were sure we got some. So we sent three men to go through the hedgerow, that little opening and I was about 20 yards away. We were all right up on that hedgerow about 150 of us. And that was the only passageway through that big hedgerow. And the first man went through and the second man, and they went through very close together; and they had set a booby trap. I remember body parts falling into the rice paddy and it made little splashes, the chunks of their body from the water in the rice paddy. And then we all charged and went through and found nothing. All we found was spent rounds, brass casings. No blood, no bodies, nothing. We lost 33 men in an hour that day. And that was just one of the times I remember and it makes you realize that life is just so dang precious, you know? And I was just a baby. And I was thinking to myself, "it could be me out there, or parts of me." And you don't know what to say after all this takes place within an hour. And you don't know what to say to the comrades you have left that are still standing. And you almost feel guilty because they're gone and you're still okay. I don't know how to describe it. And then you know, back home, those men that gave it all that day, how is that gonna affect their families for the rest of their lives? The rest of their lives. Some of them were married, some of them weren't. Mothers, dads, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters. That man didn't give his life for his country just that day and just go away. They're going to send his body back, or pieces of it, and the rest of that is gonna be forever. But that was really hard to figure out how to juggle these emotions. We were all young. Average age when I went over was 19. Pretty much a baby, that age. Some of us were 17, like myself, and others 18, some 20, 21. We had a few old-timers that were 30. So it was very difficult to try to figure out what do I do? How should I be feeling? And

you grieve but you can't grieve too long, you've got to stay pretty sharp. You've got to be up on your game and you're there to watch your brother's back, you know? That's what it's about. You lay it down for him he'll lay it down for you, and many did. Many did.

Interviewer

Are there any other stories you'd like to share with us?

Stu Shipley

I know that many vets, especially Vietnam vets--and my heart goes out to the men of Afghanistan and Iraq--different time, different place, but same stuff going on in their heads and their hearts. But we did have some good times in Vietnam. I do remember playing cards with men you never knew because they sent 'em over, we lost so many men so quick, they kept sending us what we'd call "greenies," fresh from the United States, right off the boat. After I was there about four to six months, our company, being the first battalion there, you realized something: Don't get too close to somebody. I was changing and I didn't even know it. I don't want to know your name. I don't want to know whether you got brothers and sisters, where you went to school. I don't want to know what town you live in, I don't want to know anything about ya. So you revert and you stay back because probably this man that you will become friends with will be dead in a month and you'll have to say good-bye to him. So I don't want to get too close to ya. And that's what happened to a lot of us over there, after you were there, four, five, six months. And you bonded with these men, you'd lay down your life for these men but you didn't want to get close to them, does that make sense? I mean it's like you just didn't want to know who they were or where they were from. Don't share much with me, because the more you share with me about your life and where you came from, and your family, either I'm gonna go or you're gonna go and we're gonna have this really close bond and it's gonna be harder. So you put this wall up in front of ya. And it was sad in one way, but it had to be. And it's not that you wouldn't get close to this man or lay down your life for him, but you really didn't want to get that close because it was so hard to see these men go. They just tag 'em. Tag 'em and throw them in the body bag and ship you home. And then the protesters back here and some of our senators and congressmen, totally against the war. This man just laid down his life for you. You're free to walk around and say what you want here in the United States of America. That's why we live here, that's why we're the greatest country in the world. But somebody has died for that freedom, somebody has given you that. Lest we forget this? Our forefathers haven't. So it was very hard to figure out how should I be feeling here? And you put a wall in front of ya, you do. And I think a lot of vets carried that wall home and it got worse. It did for me. It did for me.

Interviewer

So how long was that first tour?

Stu Shipley

Thirteen months. Twelve and a half, thirteen months. And then they shipped me back to Okinawa for 30 days. I didn't know how to the act, you know? I was like wow, I can actually walk around the street here and just relax a

little bit. But you couldn't. You were like a piano wire and every little sound, every little noise--you were just aware of your surroundings much more. I didn't realize it until after I got back from my second tour; it was like your hearing, your sense of smell, your taste, very acute. Because you listen so hard at night in the jungle, and even if you're in the perimeter, if you're not on patrol, you're in a bunker somewhere or you're sitting in a mud hole and you're listening. And we've got the constantan wire wrapped out there with the C-ration cans hanging on it and you put rocks in it or links off the machine gun belt so if they touch that wire it rattles and you can hear something's coming up. So your senses get really acute but you don't realize it until you're there a while. But a lot of stuff goes on in your mind like, "Am I doing any good here? Is this really working for us?" But you keep telling yourself or you remember your oath, and the men that had died in the Second World War and the First World War. What about the Civil War? It goes back to the end of time we've done this. So I felt that there was a reason we were there and I really felt that I was doing the right thing. Later on I changed my mind, but at that particular point in time I thought it was the right thing. So I did my month back there and got refreshed and went back again.

Interviewer

So you didn't go back to the States?

Stu Shipley

No, sir. Okinawa and then back again. Picked up more troops in Okinawa and more greenies and trained them a little bit and then went back again, did some more. But they moved us around a lot and we stayed on a bridge, we protected a bridge for about four months. I can't remember the name of it, it's right on the coast, south of Da Nang, a big bridge, had a train running through it. We had to stop and search the train every day. The train went north and south through it and we stopped and searched the train. We had bunkers set up. That was actually some of the best duty I had but like I was saying, we had some good times. We did laugh. You had to find time to laugh. Guys would tell some jokes or get a letter from home, something crazy that one of their buddies said. And you clung to those few little minutes that would make a guy smile because--if you look at some of the documentary on Vietnam, and there's a bunch of it, look at the faces of the men that are there. Look into their eyes. It's the same thing you saw in the Second World War and Korea. It's not a pretty picture and you can see in a man's eyes what he's feeling and thinking. And it's somewhat of a hopelessness feeling of, "Will I make it home? Will I ever see my wife again? Will I see my mother, my father, my brothers?" Yet these guys get up and keep going. And they instill--at least the Marine Corps did for me--they instilled in me that you can do this. You may give your life for it, but you can do it. And if you do give your life, remember that you will die with honor. And guys like myself that have made it back, I can't speak for 'em all, but the guilt I carry sitting here now with you is great. I am a survivor. I made it. So many didn't. I pray for them.

Interviewer

When you were searching that train, did you ever find any contraband?

Stu Shipley

Yeah. It was funny; our machine gun was not in a bunker. You know, the French were there before we were and they beat the heck out of them guys too, so they didn't do too well. And they had built a lot of concrete bunkers all over the place, everywhere, out in the jungle; you'll see these huge concrete bunkers. And so we put our machine gun in the second story of this concrete bunker which gave us a shot of the whole bridge, clear across to the mountains on the other side five miles away. And the Viet Cong were supposed to be on that side of the bridge and you had the good guys on this side where we were guarding. But we found a lot of weaponry, Russian weaponry: Russian rifles, Russian ammunition, Russian hand grenades. Communists. A lot of Communist gear that they tried to smuggle out to get across to them. Now where they came from before they got on the train, I couldn't say, I don't know. But we did haul hundreds and hundreds of hundreds of pounds, probably thousands of pounds of rifles, pistols, a lot of hand grenades, some mines. We did find a lot of contraband trying to get to the Viet Cong on the other side. And of course we took that and sent it back to Da Nang to the Air Force Base and they just confiscated it, I don't know where it went from there.

And we also, we took in as prisoner, a lot of what we figured were Viet Cong, that were riding the train pretending to be just south Vietnamese civilians. And we had South Vietnamese interrogators that spoke Vietnamese and we had three or four of them with our company. They were all over the place; with every dispatch and company they had to have interrogators and people that spoke the language. And so from those men they were kind of more able to figure out this guy was really not a South Vietnamese regular, he's Viet Cong, we're going to handcuff him and take him out of here.

And I do remember one time we swept through this village, another patrol, this was months later after we got off the bridge. We received some fire and we fired back and two of these Viet Cong surrendered, came out and surrendered with their hands up. And the Vietnamese interrogators--and we also did dispatch too, some South Korean Marines. They were from South Korea, they were Korean Marines. And I didn't even know about 'em, didn't think Korea had Marines. But these were some tough guys. These guys were short and tiny and mean as a mud fence. And they interrogated these men, these two Viet Cong. And long story short, I guess they had admitted they were the enemy and they beat 'em up pretty good right there, right there in the middle of the village in front of us, in front of some women and children. And I'm thinking, man, let's get these kids out of here. But these children are used to seeing this brutality and it boggled my mind. It was like they were just standing there watching a parade or something like that. And they were beating on these guys pretty hard. So they beat the one guy so bad he could hardly stand up and there were sticks and clubs and stuff. And he fell down on the ground and they brought in a helicopter to haul him out of there and the one guy wouldn't get up. So the one South Vietnamese interrogator, he ran over and pulled his bayonet off his rifle and just gutted him. Just gutted him right there on the ground. Like you gut a dear. And there's four or five little kids standing over there, their mother, just standing there watching. Of course the other guy jumped on the helicopter; I don't know where he went. But that stuff went on every day over there. Now these little children, there was a couple little girls, eight or nine; couple little boys, five or six--they stood

there and watched this man gut this man while he was alive. Gutted him. Put his knee on his throat on the ground and gutted him. It was upsetting to me. I thought well, "he's given up, he's surrendered." Of course these guys probably, two months ago, killed some of my friends, I don't know. How are you supposed to take that? What is your reaction supposed to be here? Are you supposed to say, "Okay, well, I'm not a barbarian, I'm a soldier. Is this right? I don't know." But it's war. It is what it is.

Interviewer

That's a lot of baggage to carry back.

Stu Shipley

Yeah, and I didn't think much of it when I got back. I got back, still had a year and a half left in the Marine Corps. This was 1966. About a year and a half. So they put me at what they call a Base Game Unit over in Camp Pendleton and I was a Game Warden. That was good duty. I helped regulate the hunting and fishing on the game and road around in my jeep with my little Game Warden badge and thought about all the guys who were still over there, who were going over. But it started wearing on me a little bit. And like I say, I was going to stay in, but I didn't want to go back again. If I shipped over I would've went back in. I had what they called a critical MOS, machine gunner, mortars and such. So that's a critical MOS. Machine gunners and rocket men don't last long in Vietnam. If you were the enemy and you see a squad coming at you, are you going to shoot at the guy with the biggest weapon or the smallest weapon? You're going to take out the man that gives you the most firepower. You want to take out that machine gun, you want to take out the guy carrying the machine gun. Machine gunners didn't last too long. Guys that carried the big weapons, they had the big target on their head.

Interviewer

How long was that second tour over there?

Stu Shipley

It was not a year. It was eight months, about seven or eight months. It was like doing a tour and three-quarters. They just cut me loose, I thought I'd be there another full year at least but it was seven or eight more months that I did. I did like 19 months total, something like that, over there, and sent me home. But you know, everybody carries this baggage and then you don't think a whole lot about it after the war. I got out, I started driving a truck and putting my mind somewhere else. And then it starts eating on ya.

Interviewer

Any other stories you'd like to share with us about your time over there?

Stu Shipley

I know I grew up quick. I realized that life is very precious and you should take it more seriously. Someone you meet in your daily life may not have much effect on you; you might think they don't have an affect on you. But if you take just a few minutes with that person to talk and share something--just something, something small--that will come back to you 100-fold later on and you'll say, "I remember this guy. I remember this man. And he put it out

there for me." And I think too much of us walk through this life and don't realize how precious life in itself is and the people we meet. Even if it's somebody you don't particularly like or you make somewhat of an enemy, realize that that person has touched your life, you've touched their life. Somehow there's some good in it somewhere. And it will change you. It makes you think different of life in general. And being over there was a brotherhood like no other. Like no other I've ever known. And that's what made me so close to the men that I was serving with. And most of them I didn't know because we were detached to different companies because we were a weapons platoon, so they kept sending over new men. I never really knew, they were like strangers. But you get to know them and realize how great these men really are and what they're going to sacrifice over here, not knowing whether they'll make it home today or the next month or if they'll make it home at all. And the things that went over in Vietnam, the gamut is indescribable. Now those are just a few of the experiences that I personally witnessed, and more. But there are guys, that if you could talk to them, would tell you horrible things that are just almost unimaginable.

We had one guy come to our platoon from another platoon that was overrun. I don't even remember this man's name, little kid, a lot shorter than I was and I'm not a tall person. And he told me his platoon was overran and we heard the firing over a mile away, they got attacked really heavy by 500 or 600 Viet Cong. And there was only a couple hundred of them up on that hill and they got overran and he was one of only four survivors of that operation. And I asked him point blank, I said,

"Man, how did you make it out of there?" And he pulled his dead buddy over the top of him. He said,

"I felt like a coward." I said,

"Are you kidding me? You did all you could do. You were overrun." He said,

"There was only four or five of us left." So he pulled his dead buddy over the top of him and laid in that mud hole and his buddy's blood ran down on him and they passed him by. Now think of that for a minute. Somebody you've shared blood, sweat, and tears with, shared your meals with, talked about home, and you had to drag his dead body on top of you to survive. And then push him off and leave him. Just think about that for a minute. This went on daily in Vietnam, in all different situations. You know, and not to mention the mortar attacks, you'd get mortar attacks constantly. And some places more than others like Chu Lai and Phu Bai, they were under constant mortar attack. You don't know where it's gonna hit. There's no cover. It's a hard, hard thing--and you try to decipher this in your mind when you're there and it gets worse when you got back and you continued on with your civilian life. It's hard to put in perspective. How's this work now. How do I feel about this now? What I did over there, was it right, was it wrong? I got back, hundreds of thousands of us got back, a bunch of us made it. The 58,200-and-some-odd that didn't. Where are they? What about the MIAs?

I had the privilege and honor to sit one-on-one with a prisoner of war from Vietnam. He was in the Air Force. It's very difficult to describe this man's character. There aren't words to describe it. He was submitted to some torture that was beyond our imagination. And here I sit, with a full stomach of food and had my coffee this morning. What this man went through for six years, will I ever understand it? Never. Never. And these are the things that the

Vietnam vet carries with him his entire life. And then when most of us got back we were spit on and called baby killers. Where's that coming from? I didn't go over there to kill babies, none of us did. Did children get shot? Yes. Did they die in war? Yes. That's war. That's what happens. I didn't know anybody that wanted to kill somebody. To look down the scope of a rifle and take a man's life, to point that gun in that direction, to pull that trigger on someone you don't know. All you know is he's the enemy. Why? And then watch his head explode. Try living with that.

And then when you get back you're called a baby killer? How do you adjust? My heart goes out to every combat vet that's ever walked on any land. And there were a lot of men that went to Vietnam that never saw any of that stuff; their job was motor pool or a cook, and my hat's off to them also. God bless 'em, they served their country, they did what they had to do. But for the vets that came back, no one came back the same that I know. And most of 'em are still very bitter. And I hope they seek help. It's important. A lot of them will not talk about it. Very difficult for me to talk about it, extremely. But it's a healing process. Will it over go away? Will this mess ever go away? Well, Afghanistan vets, when they come back--20, or 30 years from now, will the horrors of war that they saw, will it go away? Never. Never. Can you learn to live with it? Yes. Can you learn to understand you did what you thought was the right thing for your god and your country? Yes. Is there peace in your mind? You have to work at it. You have to work at it. I still have nightmares as well as how many other hundred thousand vets. They are much less frequent than they were 20 years ago but any little thing can spark it. Any little thing can spark it. I used to be a hunter. I used to like to hunt jack rabbits. When I got back from Vietnam I never hunted again. Because I've seen what bullets and shrapnel can do to a body. And the thought of just going out and taking a rifle and shooting a dear, having that bullet rip through that flesh, no. No more. No more.

Interviewer

You said you thought you were doing the right thing. When did you decide that it wasn't a good war?

Stu Shipley

Well, as the years rolled on, and I'm fighting the nightmares, the alcoholism, some drugs--which is very common as everyone knows with the Vietnam vet--job to job, relationship to relationship; you don't get along with people very well; you don't like being around crowds. And this got worse and worse. And so I found myself distancing myself from my family, friends, people in general. Didn't want to be around anybody, didn't want to talk to anybody, didn't want to go to a ball game, didn't want to go to a dance, didn't want to go to a movie, just leave me the hell alone. Just leave me the hell alone. I'd go up in the mountains, sit for a couple of days, take some food and sit. Get away from everybody. I think a lot of vets went through this and some still are today, 40-plus years later. And it started eating on me more and more and I kept looking back in my mind, reliving this stuff and along the way talking to some other vets, and I got more bitter. And I thought, "Wow, what has my government done to me now?" I thought they were there for me while I was there, and I knew they were there for me. Now 20-some years later, I'm getting

so screwed up in the mind and in my head that I'm wondering is this the life I'm gonna lead or am I just gonna die in some gutter somewhere or overdose or put a gun to my head? Where is this gonna go? So I was somewhat reaching out but yet I didn't want to be screwed with. Leave me alone, just leave me alone. And it got worse, and worse, and worse. So I turned bitter towards the war and the government. I've got three big footlockers that I brought a lot of my gear home with and I'd go through those and I'd go, this was my life. This is part of history now, you know, 40-some-odd years later. Are you proud of this? And I gave them to my sons; I couldn't have them around anymore. I didn't want to open the footlockers and see the utilities that I wore in the jungles of Vietnam. And I'd collected some banners from some villages and they still smelled like Vietnam, I could smell Vietnam on 'em and I thought to myself, "This is bullshit." Excuse my language. I said, "What was this all for? What was this all about? Did we do any good? No." So I got extremely bitter, extremely, for about 10 to 15 years. And I'd come home and I'd wear my uniform and my two little rows of ribbons and I'm a Vietnam vet and I made it home and I was proud. I was damn proud. And then 30 years later I'm going, this is a piece of garbage. What the hell did I do? What was accomplished? What was accomplished in this damn war? What did we do? Who did we help? Still haven't answered that question, to this day. And then it got so bad that I realized I really need to get some help. So that's when I started going to the VA. I was still shutting out my family, friends, very much stayed by myself. Got off the alcohol and drugs and tried to clean myself up a little bit but still very nervous inside, very... I got a wall. I think all vets got that wall around 'em; it's a big high wall. You don't let anybody in. Do not let anybody in because you'll get screwed in the process. They'll hurt ya. And I still have that wall today. It's not quite as high as it was 20 years ago. And thank God there's some good people at the VA, I wish I could know all their names. But I just got out of some heavy treatment here last year and I'm on some medication like most vets are, and I'm not ashamed of it.
The Veteran's Administration has a lot to offer combat veterans and these guys need to take full advantage of this. It's helpful and it's helpful to talk to other vets. And I know there's a lot of vets out there that refuse to talk about this war. But it happened and it affected their lives and it affected their family's lives. At some point in their life they have got to come to face with this. It's the only way to get some peace. There's no other way to gain some peace in your mind and in your heart and to know that what you did back then was what you did for God and this country. Be it right or wrong, you have to find this peace. And the only way to find it is to look for it and don't give up. It's there. So that when you lay your head down at night you can rest peacefully. Not about what you did or what you saw, or who you saw go home in pieces in body bags, but just to know that you did your duty for this great country. Because I guarantee ya, 40 years from now, somebody's gonna be doing it for you.

Interviewer

You were there almost at the beginning. As far as you know, was it different in the beginning than after you left?

Stu Shipley

Yes, a lot different. We were there at the very beginning of the war. It was very sporadic and there weren't very

many troops there then. There was a lot but not like in the late '60s and then in the early '70s. We were full-force massive then. And I'm actually grateful I wasn't there in '70, '71, '72, '68. But it had changed. I've talked to men who came back in '68 and it had changed. It was more violent in a lot of ways. More men were being killed then because there wasn't so many men when I went over, because we didn't have that troop force mass over there, so the kill ratio was lower, our kill ratio, the men that died--was lower. In retrospect it was probably just as bad because say you had 20,000 men there when I went over or whatever it was, our kill ratio was maybe 10 percent, 20 percent, whatever it was.

And then in the '70s you had 500,000 men over there and then now you're up to 38, 40 percent -- I don't know the numbers. But in retrospect it was all the same; guys were being killed and blown up daily. But the war did change. It escalated greatly and the men that went over in the late '60s and early '70s, fought the same war, but with more intensity, they definitely did. And then there was the pull out, and everybody saw the pictures on the news when we actually left there. It was, for me, I watched it with great interest. For me--this is going to sound crazy--I felt like we'd lost the war. I felt like we'd given up and all those sacrifices of all those men and their families, what was it for? We just pulled the heck out of there. I don't know if people realize how much equipment was left over in that jungle. Millions of dollars of equipment. And I wasn't there when we pulled out; I saw it on the news. I'm grateful that we got out and didn't lose more men after that, but I felt such a letdown like we're just gonna pull out and everything that was done before, what the hell? What was that for? It was like we'd lost, and America doesn't lose. At least I don't think we do. I'm still very patriotic; the flag brings tears to my eyes because I know how many men before me gave their life for that flag. Do we have problems in America? Of course. And that's just life, and people going hungry in this country. People that get help that shouldn't get it. People that don't get enough help that need it. We got lots of problems in this country, but you just look around this world and tell me a better place there is to live. No. This is a blessed land and because we are free, and because we have fought for that freedom, and the men and women that wear the uniform of our armed services, including the Coast Guard and the National Guard, anybody that puts on a uniform, I don't care what branch of service--they're literally saying I will fight for this country to the death. Man, we can go to sleep at night knowing our shores and our borders are safe. That to me is an amazing accomplishment and very humbling, extremely humbling. And it gives me a lot of gratitude to know that somewhere tonight, while I close my eyes, there's somebody standing guard. Somebody's going to watch over me and lay it down if he has to. And that's why this is America. Can we get any better than that? I don't think so. Have we done wrong? Sure. But this is the greatest country in the world. It's what we did in the Second World War and Vietnam and Iraq and Afghanistan and Korea, First World War. We've done what we've done because we did our duty and we didn't shun from that duty. Blame us if you will, but remember when you go to sleep tonight you're free. You can watch outside your door and call the President an SOB and you won't go to jail and you won't be tortured. Why? Because you are free and somebody has laid down their life to give you that freedom. And I love 'em all.

Interviewer

Tell us what they had you do in boot camp.

Stu Shipley

Boot camp back in 1964 was a little bit different than it is today. Still tough, very tough. We lived in what was called Quonset huts; they're just metal buildings shaped kind of half-round like half a donut. There was no heat in 'em, so pretty cold, with a concrete floor. And the training was very, very, very physical. Also very mental. The drill instructors back then were allowed to slap you around. I don't believe now they're allowed to hit ya. We've reached a point in our society where--anyway, that's political as far as I'm concerned. But back then I got my face busted a few times and was tackled and thrown to the ground and they used a lot of profanity and get right in your face and scream bloody murder and called your mother and your sisters every foul name you could possibly think of. They want to put you in a place where you've never been. They want to make it as difficult as possible for you. They want to see who cracks under this kind of pressure. There's a lot of pressure, mental and physical. If you don't make it through boot camp you think you're gonna make it through war? Boot camp's cake compared to war. And so that's why boot camp and the Army and the Marines--especially the Marines, the Marines are noted for a really tough boot camp. That is why it is so rough and so mentally and physically draining. And much more specialized than when I went in; I'm kind of from the old corps in the '60s. Now, a lot of high-tech stuff going on, the training is much more high-tech. Ours was pretty rough and tumble.

We spent a week or two at the rifle range learning how to shoot. And there's a lot of men that went in that hadn't even picked up a rifle or a gun. I was lucky, I was kind of born and raised in the country so I'd shot rifles and pistols before and I made the Marine Corps rifle and pistol team, I was an expert rifle shot and I attribute that to the training I got in the Marine Corps. And the rifle to a Marine, that's his everything. Without your rifle you're nothing. And so the training, it was brutal. A lot of physical activity where they'd just run you till you drop or almost drop. A lot of push-ups, a lot of sit-ups, a lot of obstacle courses, very difficult obstacle courses. And now they're even worse, the obstacle courses now that I've seen on some of the training tapes are much harder than the ones I did. Of course our bodies have even evolved so the men who join the Marine Corps now are a better physical specimen that I was when I went in even though I was young and full of piss and vinegar, I think we've just evolved over the last 40-plus years. But basic training is tough and it's supposed to be tough and there's a reason it's supposed to be tough. If you wind up going to war, if you can't make it through boot camp you're got gonna cut it in war. It ain't gonna happen. So they get in your face quite a bit and make it as difficult as possible for you. You're crawling in the mud. And then you have even more specialized training--like sniper school now is the most brutal training and then the Navy Seals, that training is unbelievable. It is incredible. The mental and physical training those men go through. So how can we, as civilians, and people of the United States, look at these men that--these men do this voluntarily, okay? They go through this misery voluntarily. How would you like to try out for the Navy Seals? How would you like to try out for Force Recon? How would you like to try out for Force Recon in the Marine Corps? They raised their hand. You just signed your death warrant. That specialized training is unbelievable. I signed up for sniper school

and regimental school which is more advanced combat training. And a friend of mine signed up for Force Recon, and he failed. He didn't make it through. He made it through boot camp, didn't make it through Force Recon and he was a lot tougher than I was. So these men volunteer for this kind of duty which puts them in harm's way. It's gonna happen. If you're a Navy Seal or you're a specialized Force Recon or a Green Beret or whatever it is, Air Force. Look at the pilots. How about some of them Air Force pilots and Marine pilots that flew those F-14s, they come flying at seven-, eight-, nine hundred miles an hour, tipping the bamboo in Vietnam. Just coming down so close to the ground that the bamboo just blows almost to the ground from the pressure and the power of them jets. And what kind of courage does that take to fly that kind of machinery right into the face of oncoming rockets and machine gun fire from the enemy? It takes more than most anybody could imagine. What about the helicopter pilots? What about the medics? What about the medics that trained to save your life while the fire and the bullets are flying all around? What kind of men are those? What kind of courage does that take to run out, when everybody else is ducking and getting down, and you run to save a man you don't even know. That war has such a spectrum of a circle of personalities and bravery, compassion, happiness, sadness. It encompasses everything you could possibly imagine in ten volumes of encyclopedias of psychiatry and our social being. And those men were all just there but that was their job. And you never heard about 'em, you never saw 'em, there was no big parade, there was nothing given for that medic that ran up under fire and got wounded twice and then crawled to the man who had his leg blown off to administer morphine and console him and put his arm around his head and tell him he's going to make it, and then go crawl to somebody else that was hurt. What kind of man is that? I'll tell you what kind of man he is; he's the guy down the street. He's the farmer. He's the truck driver's son. He's the mailman's son. He's the teacher's son. He's an average guy, doing an average job? Not hardly. Not hardly. That was the training and that's what brought out the training. That training gave you that--this is what we do, this is how we do it. And it was tough, but you learned to do it with the men around you and that helped you pull through that. You worked as one; you're not an individual in the service. You're a group of men working together, like a machine. And when it's all running good, it cannot be beat. I think our history has proved that. I think about Chesty Puller who is quite a decorated Marine in the frozen chosen in the Second World War. He was surrounded by a thousand Germans, there was a couple hundred of 'em left, middle of winter. You know what he told his men? "Don't worry men; we got 'em where we want 'em." Completely surrounded and outnumbered. And he won that battle and moved up. They were outnumbered ten to one. Now was that because the men were better fighters than the ones that were surrounding 'em? No. It was what they carried here; it was what they had here. And that's not bought. You don't buy that. That's earned. And there were many, many more, hundreds more like him. But it's somewhat of a spiritual thing too, you know? You don't have to be a spiritual person, but you see those men that charge, you see them charge, you think you're going to sit there and wait? No, you're shoulder to shoulder with this man, charging through this village, firing. Why do you do that? Because that's what you do. And that takes some serious courage. And there were some greatly decorated heroes in the First World War, Second World War, there were some

Congressional Medal of Honor winners. What do you say about those men? Silver Star, Bronze Star, Navy Cross; it goes on and on and on and on. But to me, every man that took up a weapon, whoever saw combat in any part of this world, you're my hero. He's my hero. Whether he did something great or not. Why? Because he was standing guard for his country, the United States of America. Is there anything better? No.