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Charles Shinderman
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Interview with Charles Shinderman
Date of Interview: 15 March, 2005
Interviewer: Kate Berry
Transcriber: Kate Berry

B: Can you please state your name...

S: Charles Shinderman

B: What service were you in?

S: Army

B: What was your MOS (military occupational specialist)?

S: 13 alpha 10, which was artillery...

B: How old were you when you entered the war?

S: Twenty-four years old

B: Why did you join the army?

S: I was about to be drafted. When I graduated from college, I could not get a job it was in early 1968 nobody would hire me because I was draftable status 1A. I was not going into teaching where there would be deferments, I was not married where there were deferments, and I was not a conscientious objector and so I enlisted before I was drafted, thinking I wanted to be an officer.

B: Where were you when you enlisted to be in the war?

S: Newark, New Jersey.

B: What kind of training did you go through before you were sent to Vietnam?

S: Before I was sent to Vietnam I was sent to the standard basic training for ten weeks. Which is standard infantry training that everybody goes through at that time in the military. Another ten weeks of AIT which is advance infantry training and where you would then be in a specialty, and

my specialty at that time was Honest John, Little John Rockets, of which they did not have in Vietnam. The first free flight N.A.D.O. (Northeast Aisa Defense Organization) nuclear weapons, they were being phased out, my unit was the last to be trained in them, and when I enlisted I said I was going to be an officer, and when I found out what type of officer I was going to be, I dropped out of OCS and that is how I got sent to Vietnam.

B: Where were you stationed in Vietnam?

S: My base camp was in Dong Tam, the 4th corps zone in the Mekong Delta, the southern most military base in Vietnam.

B: Can you tell me what a Camp Dong Tam was like?

S: It was a small city, all 9th infantry personal and a lot of Vietnamese that worked on the base. It had everything from dispensary hospitals, EM club, a church, and various camps for the personal. Self sufficient city with about 10,000-15,000 people.

B: Where did you sleep?

S: A hooch, a hut which was simply empty ammo boxes filled with dirt, we made walls and houses out of them. When we were in base camp, we had a cot inside the hooch and that is where we slept. There were ten men in my hooch.

B: What did you eat?

S: When we were in base camp we ate kitchen rations. Most of the time when I was out in the field we ate C-Rations. Hot meals we only had at base camp.

B: You mentioned that you were artillery airmobile. Can you please explain what that means and what you were assigned to do?

S: The airmobile artillery unit was assigned to follow the infantry out on patrols. In other words, they were going to do search and destroy in a certain area and we would be flown in within five miles where they were so that we could fire support for them when they came in contact with the enemy. We were constantly moving all over South Vietnam from Saigon and South, which was our area. We were in many locations for many different periods of time. I could be in the field for a day, a week or even a couple of months, we never knew, that is why we were airmobile.

Whenever they needed us we picked up and followed the infantry units wherever we were going. We would sleep on the ground or in a hole that we dug up ourselves. We ate our C rations and did not shower, only in base camp. If we knew that they were going to be in an area longer than expected, helicopters would come and re-supply us at whatever location that we were at.

B: Can you please explain what a day in the life of being an airmobile soldier like yourself was like in Vietnam?

S: Long and hot and tired. Our days usually consisted of in the morning we would clean our guns from firing of the night before, break out new ammo and get it fused and ready to go for the next fire mission do any other things that they asked us to do and usually during the day is when we catch a little bit of a rest once we were finished with all the duties that we had to perform. At night is when we were most active, we had a lot of our

fire missions at night. I happened to have been in Base Peace which is the first gun to go in and fire in support of the infantry unit out there, so we were the first guns to be called by our radioman and they would call, fire mission coming down and we would jump out of the hooch get the guns set up and ready to fire and would be on the radio whether it was a go mission or not. We would fire the mission whatever it might be, however many rounds or for however long for the people who needed our support and then we would return to the hooch after it was over. This went on all night long. We rarely got more than two hours of sleep any night. No such thing as Fridays, Saturdays or weekends, it was seven days a week, we didn't think of what day of the week it was, it meant nothing, you worked everyday, all day.

B: Did you know why we were at war with Vietnam?

S: When I went I was also a little young and naive and believed what our country was telling us and our leaders were telling us, and I did at the time certainly believe in the Domino Theory of all South East Asia falling into Communism. Because if you do remember in the early 1960's the Soviet Union was still expanding its empire and they were taking over countries and were supporting the North Vietnamese, and so yes at the time I thought it was the right thing to do to go to war.

B: Everyone talks of these rice paddies that were all over the place. Can you please explain to me what they were?

S: A rice paddy is just what it is, a rice paddy. A swamp where the rice is planted underwater and there are dikes to keep the water in. It was

extremely hazardous and very messy, it was not a nice thing, you would try to avoid going in rice paddies as much as possible if you could. They were not all over the country, mostly in the south and central parts. They were dangerous to be in because there was no cover to protect yourself. If you are walking through a rice paddy the jungle is fifty yards to your left or right or in front of you they can conceal themselves quite easily in the jungle and you have no place to hide. You usually can get shot at pretty easily or you try and get to a dike and usually by the dike they had punji stakes and they could get you that way too. A punji stake was a harden piece of bamboo with a sharp point that was held up to a fire and hardened and stuck it in the ground so you could not see it, it is a pretty serious thing.

B: How did you and your fellow comrades entertain yourselves at night?

S: In my particular MOS we had to stay pretty straight. Meaning we could not drink any beer. No real entertainment. You could read a book. It was hard for me to sit and concentrate and read a book. You would basically write letters or read were pretty much the only activities you had at night in my area. No such thing as free time really. Unless you were back in base camp, they might give you an afternoon off if they knew nothing much was going to go on. You could go to the EM club, or pick up some stuff at the concession area. No such thing as time off. 24/7 is what they say now.

B: Were you ever injured?

S: Yes, but not enough that I wanted to apply for a Purple Heart. I was nicked by a piece of shrapnel on my cheek but that was it. They laughed

at me. All I needed was to put a butterfly bandage on it. I did not need any stitches or anything. I certainly was not going to say I wanted a Purple Heart for that. I was very fortunate.

B: I was told that you lost a lot of your hearing from being in Vietnam. Is there a specific instance that happened that made you lose your hearing?

S: Yes, that is correct, specifically because I was with an artillery unit. They did not have any earplugs for us at that time and even if they did, we would not have been able to hear the commands. The radioman gives us the command on what we have to do. You have to get the commands and they have to be executed perfectly or people are going to be hurt. A degree or a mil, there is 3,600 mils in a circle, one mil error on an artillery round that we are firing, the 105s changed the position of a round ten meters for every 1,000 yards it went out. So if we are firing 4,000 or 5,000 yards, that round was going to be fifty or a hundred feet away from where it is supposed to be. So you could end up putting it on your own troops instead of the enemy. So you could not wear earplugs and hear the commands. The commands had to be executed to perfection or people died.

B: What kind of weapon did you carry?

S: I carried the standard M-16.

B: Were you ever afraid to use it?

S: Never, because in war it is either, kill or be killed, it's very simple. And the job of a soldier is to kill. Maybe sad, but that is what your job is. If you hesitate, you do not get second chances, there are no do-over in war. I

learned this in my training. They train you not necessarily to think, but to react. If you have to hesitate to react it is usually too late. Your name usually ends up on the wall. I do not think I ever knew anyone who was afraid to fire it either.

B: Did you interact with the Vietnamese at all?

S: Not really, tried to stay away from them as much as possible. You never really knew who the enemy was and who was not. Compared to Iraq today, you do not know, they do not wear uniforms. They didn't wear uniforms then in the Mekong Delta where we fought mostly Vietcong. They did not have uniforms on and sometimes they could very easily blend in with the South Vietnamese. Did not know who was friendly and who was not. They could turn on you at any time. As many did, so I tried not to interact with the Vietnamese.

B: Were you ever frightened or did not feel that you were capable of the tasks that you were assigned?

S: No, I thought I could do all tasks that were asked of me. And was I afraid? Every second that I was there. War changes you forever. Some people have the ability to put it some place in the back of their brain and go on with their life like nothing ever happened. God bless those people. Everyone is obviously different and a lot of people can not handle it. In fact, a lot of people are totally unaware of how many Vietnam Veterans have committed suicide since the war. It is a tremendous amount. Possibly as close as to how many peoples names are on the wall right now. People who could not deal with it, and just snapped for whatever

reasons. Some of the things that they had to do or experience were horrific.

B: I heard that there was a lot of drug use in Vietnam. Were you ever surrounded by that?

S: I would not say I was surrounded by it, I definitely knew it existed, there were many places where people smoked marijuana but probably not very much when I was there, the drug use started to increase after I left. We started to pull out in the end of 1969 and I was part of the first 25,000 troops to go home. Certainly no one with a brain would be doing drugs and going out into the field because you have to be on your toes and sharp. But later on when there was a lot less going on. I understood that there was a lot more drug use. Especially heroin and opium because, that was so readily available.

B: Do you think that because of the drug use, many veterans were known to have gone crazy or crazy after the war?

S: I am sure it was a contributing factor. They do not treat the soldiers the same as they do now compared to when we were in Vietnam. When you are out in the field and you came home from Vietnam, if you ETS, which meant that you left the military right from Vietnam, it was like a few days later you were back in the real world. They did not do any debriefing, nothing. So you take a man out of a jungle put him back into society, and he does not know how to act. So the veterans react, and they snap and that is why so many are in prison or on drugs because they could not deal with the reality of the real world. Another part of it is that for the wounded

ones, they had to spend time in the VA hospital and the VA was overwhelmed with wounded and amputees they kept the men heavily sedated and once they recouped or could not do anything more for them, sent them home, they were hooked. So our own government sort of caused a lot of problems for the veterans. Not intentionally but a byproduct of their policy or procedures at the time. But now they debrief. Even in WWII they were on a boat, so they had a month to debrief and get their heads together and talk to others about what was going on in their heads. It was very difficult.

B: How did you correspond with your family members while you were in Vietnam?

S: Letter, I think I was in Dong Tam one time when I got to a phone and spoke to my father and mother once when I was there. The only other way to correspond was through mail and they had little tape recorders, and send tapes back and fourth. But that was it.

B: Was the U.S. entrance into the Vietnam War the correct decision?

S: At the time yes, but hindsight is always 20/20. Thinking about it now, and it probably was not.

B: Who won the war?

S: Well, we sure as heck did not, because it was fought politically. Militarily we won virtually every battle. But you can not fight a war politically. I can tell you one experience in a cease-fire that we had during the holidays, we were the only ones to have the cease-fire. We were not allowed to fire at the enemy but they were allowed to mortar us and shoot at us, but we

were not allowed to return fire. You can not fight a war like that. We had our hands tied, we could not go into Cambodia, we were not suppose to go into Cambodia, they would fire at us, and then run across the river into Cambodia, and we could not chase them. You can not fight a war like that.

B: Was the attempt to stop Communism worth 58,000 lives and billions of dollars?

S: They would have spent the billions of dollars on nonsense anyways. But 58,000 young men, no, not really, yes but no, it is a tough question to answer, it was very costly, whether it was right or wrong, I don't think anyone can ever come to a consensus on that.

B: Your view on the current war in Iraq?

S: The world has changed, since 9/11 people should realize that we are not just at war with Iraq but terrorists from all over the world. These people simply want to eliminate our way of life. They want to destroy Western civilization, whether it is the Americans, or Catholicism, or Judaism, these people have risen an entire generations were they teach their children to hate, and taught to hate and to kill and they will be martyr if they commit suicide or do suicide bombs. Yes, it is the right thing to be doing, we have to prepare to defend ourselves and Iraq is just the first step. I think we have to do it to Iran, I think we have to do it to North Korea, and I think we have to let the world know we are not going to be attacked and let it happen anytime they want. We have to seal up our borders more. I think we should be checking every container, I think it is a joke the kind of

Homeland Security that is going on right now. There are too many holes. I think that if we forget 9/11 its doomed to repeat itself. The next time it will not be 3,000 people killed, it will be 300,000 people killed. I do believe what we are doing in Iraq is the right thing. It has to be prosecuted like a war should be; you have to fight it to win. Meaning you have to have enough troops, enough weapons, the proper protection, vest and things like that, you have to have the right equipment and everything, you can not send people into battle without having bullets. And it can not be fought politically. This nonsense of a wounded man getting shot and put him out of his misery, when he is not going to live anyway and the court-martial was a joke. I absolutely disagree with that. The enemy is to be killed.

B: Your view of General Westmoreland as a commander?

S: Again, I did not have a whole lot of interaction with him. In fact, General Westmoreland was replaced just before I got there or shortly after and then he was replaced with General Abrams. I really had no interaction with General Westmoreland and again, I think his assessment at the time was incorrect on a lot of things especially troop strength on the enemy. People do not know that there were some 300,000 Chinese fighting against us coming in from the North. Very poorly underestimated. So I am not sure how good a commander he was in reality but then again, you have certain information, this is too high up really for me to answer this question. I was not privy; I was just a lowly soldier of which there was 500,000 other guys just like me. Again you see it all in hindsight when you are there you are hoping and praying that they are doing the right thing

even though some of the things that you have to do make no sense you still have to do them. And pray to God that the people above you are making the right decisions.

B: Your opinion of the search and destroy tactics?

S: That is a tough one because I was not really involved with that, the infantry units were the ones that basically did the search and destroys. We fired support for them. Probably, again in hindsight, it was not a good idea to keep on burning villages. But then again the tactics for the North Vietnamese were to come into the friendly villages and intimidate the people and force them to do what they wanted, and take their food. Unfortunately, in any war, [the] largest casualties are civilians.

B: Why did the U.S. lose the war or why did N. Vietnam win?

S: We lost because we can never win a war politically and it was fought politically. The Vietnamese were destined to win the war because they had no place to go. You corner a rat he is going to do nothing but lunge out at you. These people had nowhere to go. They fought against the Japanese, the Chinese, the French, and then the Americans. They were not going anywhere, this is their land. It is no different that if someone came over here into this country you would fight to the death. When you have that type of mentality and the fact that they have been fighting for the past hundred years, there was no way that we were ever going to win.

B: Your view of My Lai?

S: I do not think My Lai should have happened. I can understand it happening, I do not agree with it, but I can understand it. You see your

men getting chewed up, day in and day out, nicked and dined, and killed by snipers and booby traps slowly getting whittled away, one by one and you get angry and you want to get even and there has got to be pay back. And you take enough of it and eventually you lose control. And I am sure that is what happened, and My Lai was payback for a lot of our men getting killed. Was it right? Absolutely not. Certainly not to women and children. Everybody else carrying a gun that was firing at me, I would not hesitate to kill. But just to group them all together and slaughter them in a massacre like fashion and kill them, absolutely not.

B: Did you see any torturing of the enemy?

S: Actually I did. I saw a number of VC that were captured and they were turned over to the South Vietnamese where they were summarily beaten to a pulp. I do not know what happened to them after that to be honest with you.

B: Did you ever see killings of the civilians?

S: Not intentionally. Accidentally, what they call friendly fire or them just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

B: Your view of Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy and Nixon's management of the war?

S: I think Kennedy wanted to get out early on. I think he knew it was going to be a quagmire and tried to get out. I believed it was part of the reason he was assassinated. But of course that can never be proven. Johnson, well Johnson sent me there, its hard, again I am just a lowly soldier and you are talking about the presidents of the United States. He inherited the

problem. Did he try to do the right thing? I think in his heart it tore him up what he had to do. Nixon was a whole new ball game, I really can not complain about Nixon, he got me home. Obviously, I have mixed feelings, but again the war is being fought politically. You cannot hamstring your people and expect to ever win or even a negotiated peace it just does not happen. I do not know of any war in history that has been stopped through negotiation other than Korea and that really did not end it, it was an armistice.

B: Your view of Secretary of Defense McNamara?

S: I think he gave a lot of mis-information to the President and I think that led to a lot of problems. I have not read his book, I know he wrote one.

Again, that is way out of my league, I do not know, I cannot answer that one in depth at all other than a personal opinion. 20/20 is hindsight, you can look back ten, twenty years and you can say, oh well this should have been done or maybe we should have done this. At the time you do not have the luxury of long thought process, just like in combat you have to react, not think.

B: Why did not we win the hearts and the mind of the people?

S: I do not know, I think there were a lot of people who wanted the North Vietnamese to be defeated. I just do not think we went about it the right way with the search and destroys and the burning of the villages, and so many civilian casualties. I think, just like what is going on in Iraq now, they got worn down. They got worn down, after three, four or five years that we were there, they thought we were doing good and we probably were, but

when the years started to drag on, they get tired too. Is it ever going to end? Will they ever see peace? ...Did we win the hearts and minds? I do not think so, but in the beginning it is hard to imagine living in a society like Iraq with Saddam in charge, just willy nilly killing anybody and everybody that he choose with no repercussion. But in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese came and virtually killed all the mayors and the leaders of the villages and the teachers and anybody of any authority or education was wiped out. And so was there a reason to fight the war and try to save this country? I think so. But hearts and minds, it is hard to say. I did not have too many discussions with the Vietnamese on the politics of the war. I did not have that luxury to sit and talk to them.

B: Discuss Viet Cong guerilla warfare.

S: Sneaky little fuckers. They were wild little people. They would do whatever is necessary to get the job done. They were tough. Tough fighters. Again, I did not have any discussions with any; only saw a few, most of the time only getting fired at or firing at them. You rarely see the enemy, at least in the Mekong Delta where I was with the rice paddies and the jungle. A lot of it was just ambushing and booby traps. We lost most of our men through booby traps alone. 70 to 80 percent of all our casualties were from booby traps. It is not like WWII, well at least I can say that in my area and of what I witnessed, I mean there were areas where there were face-to-face type battles, but I did not experience that. Everything was in the jungles or in the paddies and you are firing blindly a lot of times. Where you were taking fire, you would just return fire. You

are going to see occasionally people moving and running around, but you have a triple canopy jungle, it is thick, you do not see very much. No such thing as lines.

B: What kept you alive out there?

S: My will to survive. My training, survival is what it always came down too. And that is one thing I will always thank the military for because no matter what happens to me in this world I know that I will always be able to make a living and survive.

B: Did you think that you were prepared to go out there and fight with only a few weeks of training?

S: No, it is mostly on the job training. You can learn things in books, but when you go out into the field and in the jungle itself, into the combat zone, you have to learn it, you can only show people so much, but you have to experience it yourself to understand. You hope you do not make a mistake because there are not any do-overs. You make a mistake; it is usually your last. A lot of the people that got killed were usually killed within the first thirty days. A lot of other things are just pure luck, wrong place at the wrong time, if two guys are standing together one guy gets shot at the other does not, you did not do anything different from the other guy, it just was his time.

B: The Vietnam War was said to be one of the most unpopular wars in history. Many people said that when the soldiers arrived home, they were not always acknowledged and often frowned upon. How does that make

you feel? Did you have any experience of being rejected because you fought in the war?

S: Absolutely, yes it was pretty disgusting knowing all the war protesters, and what is going on. You can be against the war, but you really still should be for the soldiers that are forced, remember it was a draft, it was not a volunteer army, it is a different ball game. A lot of these guys did not want to be there either. But they were there to do their duty. It hurt, but coming home, I came back to Oakland Air Force Base in California and I had my uniform on and I got spit on by somebody, and I was ready to do them right there. But you know I controlled myself. It was pretty disgusting. In fact in some units I know were told not to wear their uniforms so that you wouldn't have any problems in the airports. I did not do that. It was not a fun place to come back too. Some people appreciated what you had gone through and other people said, the hell with you, we do not care if you live or if you die.

B: What do you think America's view of you now is like? Is it still negative?

S: I think that it is a lot less negative, I think that there will always be some negativity there from the people who were against it back then, and I do not think that their views are going to change. I think that they are pretty much set in stone. Again, you glean a lot of information after the fact. And then they form their opinions. Well, at the time, you do not have all that information and so you have to form your opinion and experiences from that time. There are still some people who get on my case about it. But it does not bother me anymore. I did what I felt I had to do for myself

as Chuck Shinderman. I saw all these other people going, and something in my mind told me that this was something I had to do or I was not going to be able to look myself in the mirror again. It was something I had to do whether I liked it or not. I wasn't particularly thrilled about it, but I just knew that down the road if I survived the whole experience, that I had to do it.

B: How was being in Vietnam affected your life for the good and bad?

S: For the good, it has made me a survivor. It taught me how to handle any situation life has to offer or throws at me. I know I will be able to survive. I just know that. Adversely, of course I have a large hearing loss, which has affected my life tremendously. I miss out on a lot of things. It has made life a little more difficult, but small sacrifices, compared to what a lot of other guys went through such as, sight and limbs and their lives. My disability, as far as I am concerned, is way on the bottom of the list compared to them. They made supreme sacrifices. I can deal with my problem, so I don't hear a movie very well, big deal; these guys don't ever get to see a movie again.

B: If you were asked to serve again in any war would you? Why or why not?

S: I absolutely would. At the time if I had a family or was married, I probably would think about it differently, but as a single person I wouldn't hesitate to go again.

B: Are you proud to say that you fought in Vietnam?

S: Looking back I would rather that there was not a Vietnam. But I do not hide it from anybody. Proud, probably not the word I would use. I am proud that I served from my country when they asked me to. But probably not particularly proud of some of the things that I had to do as a soldier.

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Most soldiers are not necessarily proud of what they have to do, because you do things that in a normal society or they use against humanity and nature itself-things that you would not normally do. Bizarre-o-land, it is like a surreal world when you go to a combat zone. It is like nothing you could ever compare it too unless you have experienced it, it is virtually impossible to really explain.