

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DENNIS ZOELLNER
Seabee, Navy, Vietnam War
2000

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Zoellner, Dennis, (1944-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 62 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 62 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 62 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Dennis Zoellner, a Marinette, Wisconsin native, discusses his Vietnam War service with the Navy Seabees Mobile Construction Battalion 7 (MCB 7). Zoellner talks about enlisting with the Seabees, basic training and Seabee school at Davisville (Rhode Island), and training in heavy equipment and building. Landing in Da Nang (Vietnam) in 1966, he mentions three men being wounded by heavy fire on the airstrip. Zoellner describes building an addition to the hospital at Da Nang and the deterioration of equipment due to the hot climate. He touches on having excellent food and describes what he did to stay cool. Stationed alongside a Marine helicopter unit, Zoellner describes living under rocket fire, duty guarding the perimeter, and medical treatment for a hernia aboard the *USS Repose*. He describes arresting a Vietnamese interpreter who tried to get into the camp at night to spy on the perimeter, and he says this incident still bothers him. Zoellner touches upon readjustment problems of Vietnam veterans and claims the flight home provided no adjustment time between combat and life at home. He talks about establishing a road block to assist a Marine patrols, finding a sentry asleep at his post, and lack of military discipline in Vietnam. He says his unit did not have problems with drugs or drinking, even though beer was not limited. Zoellner expresses resentment of the poor homecoming Vietnam veterans received, lack of recognition, draft dodgers. He touches on his membership in the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Biographical Sketch:

Zoellner (1944-), born in Menominee (Michigan), moved to Wisconsin at a young age and entered the service from Marinette. He served with the Navy during the Vietnam War and eventually settled in Peshtigo, Wisconsin.

Interviewed James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Jeff Spear, 2010.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

- Jim: That's off and running. That's for the audio.
- Dennis: Them candles in your way or anything?
- Jim: [Grunts] Okay we're up and running. It's the 22nd of June, 2000. Speaking to Dennis Zoellner. Dennis where were you born?
- Dennis: In Menominee, Michigan.
- Jim: And you grew up there?
- Dennis: Ah, most of my life I spent in Marinette, right across the river.
- Jim: Practically one town, isn't it?
- Dennis: Yeah, almost. Yeah, just across the river.
- Jim: Yeah, right. And then when did you enter military service?
- Dennis: It was June '66—the 21st.
- Jim: Were you drafted or--?
- Dennis: No, I joined.
- Jim: Joined the--?
- Dennis: Navy.
- Jim: You joined the Navy.
- Dennis: The Seabees [Construction Battalions] to be exact.
- Jim: Seabees?
- Dennis: Yeah.
- Jim: Oh, you joined right in to the Seabees? You asked for Seabees?
- Dennis: Yes.
- Jim: I didn't know they if they let you do that.

Dennis: Oh yes. Yeah, they were recruiting Seabees at this time for construction people in the Vietnam area.

Jim: What experience did you have that drew you to the Seabees right away?

Dennis: Well I was working construction right after high school—I graduated in '62 and I worked construction for five years before this time—before '62.

Jim: General construction or--?

Dennis: Vodgby[??] and Leger, but most for Vodgby[??].

Jim: And so you had the basic requirements for the Seabees?

Dennis: Yes, sir.

Jim: And so they were happy to get you then. So, where did you enlist?

Denis: Right down In Marinette. I remember the name was Sweeny.

Jim: And where did they send you?

Dennis: First off was Milwaukee was for your induction and the first base was Davisville, Rhode Island.

Jim: Davis?

Dennis: Davisville, Rhode Island.

Jim: Davisville. I'm not familiar with that one.

Dennis: Oh, it's a—right at—it's your Seabee base.

Jim: Oh. Well, didn't you have regular basic training first?

Dennis: Well, we went down there and we got our six weeks basics there--

Jim: Yeah.

Dennis: --and I was there probably about four, maybe five months and going to different schools for bridge construction, road construction—different things.

Jim: Yeah, you're the first Seabee that I've interviewed, so we have to spend a little time with that.

- Dennis: Yeah, okay.
- Jim: Tell me—specifically--what were they teaching you?
- Dennis: All forms of construction from running a bulldozer to roofing a Quonset—
- Jim: In other words you had to be able to use all these instruments, all this mechanical equipment, you had to--
- Dennis: No, they gave you the rank according to your building ability.
- Jim: Really?
- Dennis: Yeah. They—well to start with that--I was in plastering, handled the trowel and rods and stuff.
- Jim: But you knew all that.
- Dennis: Right, and basically from there that's what I got drafted into, for the inside finish work for operating rooms. Our main concern in Vietnam was two—in nine months we constructed two complete operating rooms from the ground up. And you get to work with—what you didn't know they taught you, as far as running a bulldozer if you were into semi-driving, they basically—you basically did what you did in civilian life, but you were in the military--and that's the only thing, and in a combat zone—
- Jim: But you didn't get paid as much? [laughs]
- Dennis: No, ah, if I remember right, pay then—combat pay was 2.05 a month.
- Jim: 2.05 a month—
- Dennis: Which, if you ask me, you couldn't go anywhere to spend it, so it didn't matter [laughs].
- Jim: Didn't you send it home like you were supposed to?
- Dennis: Oh no, I had all I needed. I spend it before I got it most of the time.
- Jim: Were you single when you were there?
- Dennis: Oh yes.
- Jim: Well that explains that.
- Dennis: Yep [both laugh].

Jim: Okay, well we don't want to get too far ahead here. So you were there for several months then?

Dennis: Nine months we were there.

Jim: Uh huh.

Dennis: MCB 7 was my final battalion.

Jim: Tell me that again.

Dennis: MCB 7, mobile-construction-battalion-seven.

Jim: Okay, now how big an outfit was that?

Dennis: It was a thousand people.

Jim: Wow. Run by a what? A lieutenant? Or a commander?

Dennis: Captain. All regular captain. In fact they got my—this is my MCB 7 log book right there.

Jim: Okay, you were run by a force wrecker then?

Dennis: He was a captain, that's all I know. Yeah, I got his picture and everything in there if you want to look that up after.

Jim: Well I'm more interested to see what you did.

Dennis: Oh.

Jim: So, anyway, your thousand men, where'd they take you?

Dennis: Our main camp was about four miles—I believe it was east of Da Nang.

Jim: How did you get to Vietnam?

Dennis: By plane. We left—let's see, we left Rhode Island and it was twenty--if I remember it was twenty-seven and a half hours flight--we were there. From Rhode Island to Da Nang. Then they transported us from there with—

Jim: How many planes did it take to get your thousand men?

Dennis: It was—I don't know, but there it was 300 on my plane. All full combat—

Jim: So if that were right, there would be three planes that'd do it, roughly.

Dennis: Yeah, roughly. Besides supplies. In fact before we landed there we had three people wounded.

Jim: How?

Dennis: Well we came in pretty low, it was dark, and we come in—I'm assuming too low—

Jim: Took some rifle fire?

Dennis: And yeah, some. We got rifle fire through the bottom of the plane and three guys got wounded before we landed.

Jim: Jesus.

Dennis: And none of us had weapons with us at that time.

Jim: Of course not.

Dennis: We got our weapons after we landed.

Jim: That wasn't fair. [laughs]

Dennis: Not at that time it wasn't no. [laughs] Everybody kinda--[both laughing] I don't want 'em—let's go home. [loudly] Yeah, let's go home. [laughs]

Jim: [Loudly] Break! [laughs] That's like hitting before the bell.

Dennis: Right, right, exactly.

Jim: So, jeez, that's surprising, right?

Dennis: Oh—

Jim: That was an eye opener wasn't it?

Dennis: It was. Yes.

Jim: That this is not friendly territory.

Dennis: No sir, no. Not at all.

Jim: So you all landed and you got all your stuff together—the heavy equipment was already there?

Dennis: Yes. Yeah, our camp was already established.

Jim: And so your specific job was to construct a hospital?

Dennis: Yes.

Jim: At—where?

Dennis: At Da Nang hospital.

Jim: at Da Nang? They didn't have one then?

Dennis: Yes, but we added to the surgery room, the operating rooms, and I believe we was the first battalion to build Quonset huts for female nurses at this time. They didn't have female nurses until this time.

Jim: What are we talking—so this is 1960--?

Dennis: Six. Yes.

Jim: Six. Okay, this is before the major bunch of soldiers arrived.

Dennis: Really—really got hot then.

Jim: Yeah it went from a couple hundred thousand to 400, almost 500 thousand.

Dennis: Right, yeah.

Jim: So, I guess they were preparing for all that.

Dennis: Oh yeah, yep.

Jim: And, so how's the life greet you in Vietnam when you suddenly arrive?

Dennis: Oh, they took adjusting to the weather.

Jim: The heat?

Dennis: The heat was fantastic.

Jim: Yeah, that's what everybody I've talked to said.

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: You step out of that airplane, it would just--

Dennis: Boom.

Jim: --Hit you right in the face.

Dennis: Exactly. In fact when we come home, the temperature between—from Da Nang to Alaska was a 102 degrees difference. From Da Nang to—we landed in Alaska for fuel.

Jim: [laughs]

Dennis: [laughs] Comin' home. [laughs]

Jim: Incredible.

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: So, but they--they found quarters for you right after—were you in tents or-
-?

Dennis: There was huts for us already made.

Jim: Okay.

Dennis: Our main objective was to work at the hospital. Get--like I say--two more operating rooms completed in nine months among Quonsets and we road construction, we had other things going on at the same time.

Jim: What part of that were you involved in?

Dennis: I was at the hospital. Most of the tour—

Jim: Were you lapping?

Dennis: We were, well, basically anything from shoveling dirt to roofing, to—

Jim: Right, like house construction?

Dennis: Right, exactly. Yeah.

Jim: And, what you constructed wasn't any different than you had instructions—

Dennis: No. Right. The only difference was the heat. No, basically as I said--

Jim: How'd you keep warm—cool? What'd you do?

Dennis: Well, I did—we were well supplied with water, and where we could get shade we had shade.

Jim: Did they instruct you to take water on a regular basis?

Dennis: Oh yes, we would. In fact on a—

Jim: They watched that pretty carefully then?

Dennis: Oh yes, very.

Jim: Because you could get overwhelmed.

Dennis: Well they—we went in fifteen minute intervals up on the roof to put sheeting on.

Jim: That's all they allow you up there?

Dennis: Fifteen minutes at one time, then you'd come down for a half an hour. And we had power tools to turn in the screws and the bolts. The power drill would only last probably about fifteen screws and its coils would burn out. It was all hand wrenched, because the power tools wouldn't withstand the heat.

Jim: I don't understand that. I can understand how water can screw up the—

Dennis: Well the heat—

Jim: Was that moisture that got in there?

Dennis: No, it just—the heat. The electricity and the heat.

Jim: It would just stop then and seize it?

Dennis: It would just, kept breaking. Right.

Jim: And it'd be gone. I mean, there would be—

Dennis: Right. I mean there would be—

Jim: Throw it away.

Dennis: Right. Right.

Jim: There was no way to—[laughs]

Dennis: No.

Jim: To come back?

Dennis: It just burn 'em right up. Yeah. It was like, there was no, like, it would-- duct tape to hold the tool and run in without air going through. There was air going through, but it was so hot it wouldn't take it.

Jim: So the power tool would last 15 minutes?

Dennis: At most. Yeah, 15 to 20 minutes at the most, and we wound up, after we went through I don't know how many tools—it was useless, so we just used wrenches—hand wrenches—for the rest of the job.

Jim: How long did it take you to build that particular--?

Dennis: Well, it was, like I said, we had several different projects at one time. We got shifted from here to there depending on your skill.

Jim: Okay. What other projects were you involved with?

Dennis: We had some down by China Beach--most of our tour was at Da Nang hospital. That was the major that I was involved with.

Jim: How far was China Beach?

Dennis: Probably six miles from the spot. That was you in-country recreation area.

Jim: Well, so, where'd you eat?

Dennis: Basically at camp. We had--the food was--I have never--the food was excellent.

Jim: It was?

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: You had hot food?

Dennis: Yes. Very good food.

Jim: And at night, how'd you keep cool. Did they have fans?

Dennis: Yeah, most of us had fans. It was all screen huts.

Jim: Yeah.

Dennis: It cooled down at night when the sun went down.

Jim: Cooled pretty good?

Dennis: Yeah. Monsoon and it was almost to the point of miserable. Lot of guys—

Jim: It was too cold?

Dennis: Oh yeah, well, it was damp and—

Jim: Yeah. But you had electric fans? That's what—

Dennis: Right. Yeah.

Jim: No air conditioning, right?

Dennis: No. Just screen huts.

Jim: Screen huts. And how many guys to a hut, generally?

Dennis: A squad.

Jim: A squad?

Dennis: Yeah, so 15 people. Well, 10 to 15 people, I guess. In fact I got pictures in an album that I can show you.

Jim: Uh huh, yeah, sure. Well, that wasn't too bad--your food was pretty good—

Dennis: Yep.

Jim: Well it was good, better than pretty good.

Dennis: Yeah, it was—I felt we were treated very good. Even in the field when we didn't get back in.

Jim: Uh-huh.

Dennis: For the conditions, I have no complaints.

- Jim: How'd you deal with the mosquitoes?
- Dennis: I—we didn't have to seem to have no troubles. We weren't really in the--like to say--jungle. It was more sand-pan in the China Beach.
- Jim: So not many guys picked up malaria, then?
- Dennis: No, no not in our company.
- Jim: Mm-hmm.
- Dennis: We—we basically didn't see any jungle. It was all sand-pan and China Beach was on the left of us. We were surrounded by—across the road from us was highway one.
- Jim: The famous highway one?
- Dennis: Right. And MAG [Marine Aircraft Group] 16 was a helicopter base right straight across from us.
- Jim: Right.
- Dennis: And after our construction--well then we switched jobs in different things, different areas. I got to be security of the perimeter. I do it like a sergeant of the guard. And this one particular night you're in the command post and you're in charge of the whole perimeter.
- Jim: How—what size are we talkin' here?
- Dennis: Well, we're talking—I believe our compound must have been a good maybe eighty or a hundred acres. Yeah, we had it surrounded with a perimeter on the outpost and—
- Jim: Concertina wire?
- Dennis: Yes, all around. And we had people stationed about every 30--40 feet apart.
- Jim: Jesus, that's quite a few people on that.
- Dennis: Right, we had a whole company for security.
- Jim: Oh I'm sure.
- Dennis: Plus we had another company of Marines that were staying with us for back-up protection, because our people was workin' all day.

Jim: Right.

Dennis: And, basically to make sure they get some sleep without—we had our own guard people—

Jim: Mm-hmm.

Dennis: And—

Jim: You guarded with what? With what rifle?

Dennis: I had the—well when I was Sergeant of the guard they gave me a .45. When I was in the company I had an M-16.

Jim: M-16. So, did you have any problems any night?

Dennis: One night I was making a post check, and—it's a post check and they start hollering back, "One okay, two okay, three okay," and five said, "I seen flashes," and that's all he said and it was about—well we counted I think 32 rockets. Just missed. They went over our camp by about 20 feet. They were after—

Jim: That was the flashes of the rockets going off?

Dennis: Right. And that was fired from--I believe it was 19 miles away.

Jim: Jesus.

Dennis: Yeah. And it—they were after the helicopter base across the road from us.

Jim: And they just missed?

Dennis: Yes. Had they—

Jim: Who's shootin'? [short laugh]

Dennis: The guys that were in the outpost, they actually laid down on the floor, because that's how close they came over our--I mean, it took us—if you could imagine a 747 going 12 feet over your head, that's what it sounded like. It was just seconds--it was over. It's very—everybody carried their weapon then. They kinda get a little action this time--nothing's happening you know, and then after this—

Jim: They were sort of mislead--

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: --into thinking that this is always going to be this way.

Dennis: Yeah, right. We had some incoming rounds, but nothing serious there.

Jim: Rifle fire?

Dennis: Right.

Jim: Yeah, I know that this is something others I've talked to have said that--that sometimes these guys--the Vietnamese--would apparently have nothing much to do so they would just throw a few shots in.

Dennis: Right, throw a quick load that way or—

Jim: Yeah, mainly looking to see what you would do in response.

Dennis: Exactly.

Jim: So they could sort of count your weapons.

Dennis: Exactly.

Jim: Yeah, the old-fashioned war games, you know?

Dennis: Yeah, see who's got the firepower.

Jim: Right, and then it draws out a couple guys and then--[Dennis coughs]—the enemy's gone.

Dennis: Yeah. Then one other incident—well the night could either make a post-check by radio or go on foot. So, I start off at the gate--and we had orders that after six o'clock at night the gate was to be locked--and nobody was to come through. Absolutely zero. Nobody.

Jim: Zero.

Dennis: So, I'm at the gate and we had a first-sergeant Marine, a Marine first-sergeant—huge man, very pleasant man, but huge—and it was his little interpreter—he was on our base several times, and he had a little Honda and everybody was kinda rising around and he—making friends with everybody, but here he comes to the gate at three-thirty in the morning.

Jim: From the outside to in?

- Dennis: From the outside to come in. He said, "I gotta see the first-sergeant." Well, we all know him, and I said the gate is locked, I'm told nobody comes through. He said, "I gotta see him, gotta," you know, and he started jabbering and jabbering. So I went forty five—well at this time, at this point I was scared—almost not, well, I couldn't talk. I said, well, there's something wrong here. So, I went in the gate—
- Jim: You need some higher authority here.
- Dennis: Well, a higher authority—I come out a 12-gauge. I wasn't gonna trust—
- Jim: That was your higher authority?
- Dennis: That was the higher power.
- Jim [laughs]
- Dennis: Now, he's sittin' on the Honda when I come out with the 12-gauge--he was gonna back up, I said "Don't move. Don't even think of moving." I think at this point—the other guys thought I was crazy.
- Jim: What about the—he had a Vietnamese with him?
- Dennis: It was just—it was just him.
- Jim: Oh, just him.
- Dennis: But he started to cry right away and I think all of us started crying right with him, you know? He got caught. It was—he actually wanted to come in and check our perimeter. So, after I had him—
- Jim: What was he doing?
- Dennis: He was just gonna come in at three-thirty and he wanted—the excuse was to see the first sergeant. And we all knew him. We all knew that he was a supposedly a friendly—and he'd ride his Honda around and—
- Jim: But this is a U.S. Marine.
- Dennis: The first sergeant. He was our captain's interpreter.
- Jim: Ah.
- Dennis: They—he was like an overseer for our captain in the area.
- Jim: He was a Vietnamese then?

Dennis: No, no. His interpreter was a Vietnamese. And he came at three thirty in the morning at the gate—wanted to come in and see the Marine first-sergeant.

Jim: This is the interpreter now?

Dennis: Right.

Jim: Okay, I missed—misunderstood—

Dennis: Okay, yeah.

Jim: I thought that this was the Marine that was at--trying to get in.

Dennis: No, no. The Marine—he was living at our base with our captain.

Jim: So this guy who came to the gate was—

Dennis: The little Vietnamese—we thought was friendly, but he turned out that he wasn't. And then, I come out and I lock and load the 12-gauge—I says, “put your hands on the bars, don't move. Don't think of it.”

Jim: Right. So, what'd they do with him?

Dennis: Well, we called up—well I had the other guys watch him, don't let him go—and well, “what do you want?” “If he moves, shoot him.” That's all we were told. So, I got on the telephone--nobody, [laughs] nobody calls a Marine first-sergeant at three thirty in the morning, but I says—

Jim: You do if you have the shit scared out of you.

Dennis: Well, I was, yeah. [laughs loudly]. I says, “I don't care who he is, I need some power here.”

Jim: Right. [laughs]

Dennis: So I rang up the first-sergeant—the Marine first-sergeant, and he says, “You lock and load—if he moves, shoot him.”

Jim: Yeah, right.

Dennis: Well, at this time I come out and I says, “Guys, this is—this is no bullshit. This is for real.”

Jim: Right.

Dennis: And, so it took the Marine first-sergeant about—I don't think it was 45 seconds—he was at the gate, in fact, he wasn't even fully dressed.

Jim: Right. But he wasn't pissed off at you?

Dennis: [Loudly] No, no, no. He was—no—he come through the gate—we got to get to the other side of the gate and he come through the gate, he grabbed that little Vietnamese, and from that second on we never seen him again.

Jim: Did he stay outside the gate?

Dennis: No, he brought him in. But none of us ever seen him again.

Jim: Yeah, well they wanted to interrogate him.

Dennis: Well, I—

Jim: At least before they killed him.

Dennis: Something happened there, yeah. Nobody seen him leave the camp or nothin'.

Jim: Nobody asked the sergeant what he'd done?

Dennis: No sir, no. No.

Jim: I don't think anybody really wanted to ask.

Dennis: No. No.

Jim: Is that your feeling?

Dennis: Right. Yeah. He had no business there—he was just a little snake. That's, you know—

Jim: I think, yeah.

Dennis: But to counter it, you hear about it and da-da and now it's you and him. Well, before he's gonna run me over with a little Honda or pull a gun on me--I—it's gonna be him.

Jim: You never know what he had—what he had in mind.

Dennis: No, no. But he was actually a Viet Cong spy that was living—well he didn't live there, but he was coming in on a daily basis.

Jim: Some of the guys have said that some of these girls—ladies--who used to come do laundry—

Dennis: No, we didn't have nobody comin' in on our base like that.

Jim: Well, they did it. And at Da Nang they had some of them—

Dennis: Yep.

Jim: And some of these turned out to be, you know, spies.

Dennis: Cong. Right.

Jim: And they would report--

Dennis: Whatever—

Jim: --Concentrations—

Dennis: Whatever they—

Jim: --And they would look like they were doing your laundry, but in addition they were counting your troops.

Dennis: Right. Exactly.

Jim: So, that was a problem.

Dennis: No our—our camp was limited probably to this one interpreter. I've never seen any Vietnamese of any sort--other than this one--that actually came through the gate.

Jim: Would you--did you have--excuse me—did you get any liberty in Saigon?

Dennis: Not Saigon. I went to Manila.

Jim: For R and R? [Slang for rest and Recuperation]

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: How long was that R and R?

Dennis: Mine was for five days, but I--when I was there I got hernia so I was on the Repose. [The USS Repose] And that's how I got to Manila.

Jim: On the Repose?

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: I had a—

Dennis: That was a floating miracle. I got say that. Without that we woulda lost many more people.

Jim: Without the Repose?

Dennis: Yes.

Jim: I was on the Haven [The USS Haven] in Korea.

Dennis: Okay, yep.

Jim: I spent a year on the Haven, which is a sister ship.

Dennis: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Jim: Same thing.

Dennis: Yeah. That was a floating miracle.

Jim: Because--? Tell me about that.

Dennis: Well, it—the hospital is as close as you can get without bein' actually in the war or—

Jim: Right, and you sent a lot of casualties out through the Repose.

Dennis: Yes, many, many, many.

Jim: Right. You weren't involved with that, but—

Dennis: No. I was on ship, and I seen it. I had a whole bunch of pictures, but I misplaced them in camp and somebody else picked 'em up on me and on board with the helicopters--I got some of the copters comin' in and taking bodies off. It was a—again—it was a floating miracle.

Jim: A floating hospital.

Dennis: Yes.

Jim: Seven-hundred-man hospital.

Dennis: The hospital would transport them to Da Nang to get 'em there. The ship was probably closer in a lot of areas.

Jim: Yeah, I operated on about 2,000 guys.

Dennis: Boy.

Jim: When I was on board the Haven—I had a gunshot to the rib.

Dennis: Well then you know what Hell is about, too.

Jim: I know, yeah, I know what it is.

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: And it's a difficult time.

Dennis: Yes it is.

Jim: [Softly] Just hearing—[laughs]—every one—and then other times, well, we were sitting around—

Dennis: Okay, could—could I ask you a question here?

Jim: Sure.

Dennis: Okay, they talk about this Vietnam syndrome—

Jim: Post-traumatic?

Dennis: Yeah. And my theory on this is World War One, World War Two, Korean War—these guys came home on ships and it took a couple--three months to get home from the war time. Whereas Vietnam--

Jim: Flew 'em home?

Dennis: 28 hours later you're with your family and that was a hell of an adjustment for me.

Jim: I think it's too quick.

Dennis: Yes. Way too quick. They--

Jim: Yeah. 'Cause I came—when I came home from Korea—I took the hospital ship home.

Dennis: Right. But it—it took—

Jim: Yeah, that's 18 days.

Dennis: Right.

Jim: It's Japan.

Dennis: Right. But this--30 hours is not long enough.

Jim: It's too abrupt of a change.

Dennis: Yes. After being there for nine months or a year.

Jim: And the experts say that this is a fact of it, and some guys having more trouble to adjust than the average.

Dennis: Well, I had problems. I wasn't—

Jim: Well we all—everybody has problems. I knew even my slow comeback—I notice the thing about it was I had to make ordinary, simple decisions.

Dennis: Yes.

Jim: Which the Navy had taken care of, you know?

Dennis: Mm-hmm.

Jim: I didn't have to worry about where to eat or if--I was given money to pay and I was supposed to be here.

Dennis: Yeah, whatever—

Jim: I mean—and all of a sudden you know? I was—[claps once]—it was taking the car down to get this fixed or call somebody to repair this. It all seemed like it was just too much for me to handle.

Dennis: Yeah [chuckles quietly]

Jim: And I was used to big decisions. [short laugh] It was all done for you.

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: It's hard to get adjusted—to get your control of your life back.

- Dennis: Right. Exactly.
- Jim: Even though it's simple stuff. Still, it's—you're anxious when—
[laughs]—well these problems seem enormous, but they aren't. But they seemed enormous at first.
- Dennis: Right.
- Jim: [Unintelligible] So, if you're in combat or things like that--then suddenly switch from that violent situation into totally opposite—this is why a lot of guys have trouble getting over that. Because they have trouble separating that and they can't disconnect easily.
- Dennis: Right. Right. I got several of my friends not only have the syndrome, but they probably have—like a handicapped child in the family or divorce after, or their wife is living with their best buddy or whatever when they come home and what they left—their attitude and life is totally different when they come back.
- Jim: They're a different person.
- Dennis: Yes, yes, without a question.
- Jim: And, in addition to that, your wife or girlfriend—they've changed, too.
- Dennis: Oh, yes.
- Jim: A lot of guys didn't appreciate that. They assumed "I've changed," and they sort of forgot about her. Well, Goddamn it, like in World War Two, she sat there three and a half years. Everybody changes in three and a half years.
- Dennis: Oh, yes.
- Jim: But a lot of guys didn't figure that. They thought she'd be the same, sweet little high school kid when they left.
- Dennis: No, no, no. Life don't work that way.
- Jim: Exactly right. Everyone changes and so—yeah. Two forces here--I saw a lot of that and I saw a lot of—
- Dennis: I'm sure, yeah. Well you was more involved intimately than I was. My main objective was to build and we had several incidents—nothing hand to hand. We had different troops out for—toured the area for protection and whatnot.

Jim: Toured the area? What do you mean?

Dennis: Well, we set up a—well the Marines—that guy was on security during this time and the Marines were gonna infiltrate this village where they assumed there was some Cong in there.

Jim: So?

Dennis: So they contacted our company—or battalion—and they sent my squad out to make a perimeter.

Jim: Into the jungle?

Dennis: Well, to put up a perimeter.

Jim: Oh.

Dennis: To more put a blockade up so they couldn't get out the other end of the village. So we went out—it was midnight when we left camp—and took a—

Jim: [laughing] Did you take out plaster with you?

Dennis: No, no, that--

Jim: What the hell did they think you're gonna do?

Dennis: Well that night I took a 12-gauge. I went and seen my Lieutenant and I says, "Sir," I says, "There's no way I'm gonna leave this camp with .45."

Jim: Right, that didn't—

Dennis: He said, "Well you want your 16? Go get it in the armory." I said, "No."

Jim: [mumbles] 16 is enough.

Dennis: I said, "I'll take the 12-gauge and 25 rounds of buck shot." I said, "That's my gun." I said, "I know how to use it."

Jim: Double "O?"

Dennis: Yes, double "O." And I--in fact—I was goin' out my bed with a chump from Boston, he says he'd hock me 500 dollars if he could carry it. Well this guy from Boston, he had trouble finding out where to load this thing you know? I said, "I'll take care of it."

Jim: [loudly] I was gonna say you don't stand next to him.

Dennis: No, no [laughs]

Jim: Because if he's having trouble loading it—Jesus.

Dennis: I'll take the 12-gauge and after 25 rounds, I say kiss your butt goodbye—you're all goin'.

Jim: Alright.

Dennis: But we never had that. Never had no conflict there. The Marines come through—there was some shootin' through the village and the women screamin', dogs barkin' and—

Jim: Chasing everybody out? Keeping the ones they wanted to look at and talk to?

Dennis: Right. Right.

Jim: Did that operation work okay?

Dennis: It went smooth the best I know.

Jim: Nobody got hurt?

Dennis: Nope, nope. Yep, everybody—didn't hear of any incidents.

Jim: So which direction were you looking? Were you looking outside the village or—where were you?

Dennis: Well we were outside the village—we were about six miles from our camp. I dunno, just made up that perimeter for the Marines and—

Jim: Did you put mines out when you do that?

Dennis: No. We—

Jim: Just concertina? Or not concertina?

Dennis: No. We just out—a human line.

Jim: Oh.

Dennis: We were told—

Jim: You were within shouting distance of one another?

Dennis: Right. We took—

Jim: Like from here to the door? Or twice as far?

Dennis: Oh, probably—maybe a hundred yards apart. And a night reading—we took a night reading and so many steps and then you stop and then I try to let go of the hand and—we formed this line across there. And you couldn't see nothin' until daylight because it was blacker than—

Jim: It's a darker realm.

Dennis: Yeah. And walkin' in the sand you wouldn't hear anybody.

Jim: I don't think I'd like that.

Dennis: Not, no. It's very—your heartbeat was the loudest thing out there.

Jim: Sure, well you didn't know if there was trouble at all, or right next to you.

Dennis: Yeah, somebody coulda walked past you, or stepped on you.

Jim: Or stuck a knife in you'd never know until it was in you.

Dennis: Never. Right. It was—yeah. I mean, it's not like in the woods when you step on brush or—

Jim: Right. Give yourself away.

Dennis: This was sand, yeah. His breathing would probably give him away first.

Jim: Or smell.

Dennis: Or smell, yes. Yeah, they had different odors. Probably had different food than we had.

Jim: I know.

Dennis: That makes a difference.

Jim: That was—that was one of the problems in Korea. Those Koreans eat that Kimchi. Boy, you know that Kimchi? It's decayed cabbage.

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: And it smelled like garlic.

Dennis: Yeah, oh.

Jim: And you could smell those guys when they come aboard ship—

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: Because a couple—we took care of some Korean civilians—you could tell what ward they were on just by wandering around the ship. You'd say, "He's over there."

Dennis: [laughs]

Jim: You could smell them for a hundred yards almost. Ugh. Incredibly bad.

Dennis: And they don't notice it neither.

Jim: No. It's like when you have garlic breath. You don't notice it—everybody else does. [pauses] Well, that's interesting. So, that was the main excitement—was potential trouble then, for you?

Dennis: Basically, yeah.

Jim: Nobody got hurt?

Dennis: We had one guy--

Jim: On the line?

Dennis: No, it was an incident at one of the bus stops there at the Da Nang hospital where a Black man—I believe it was—I wasn't really there, but one of our people got a Purple Heart. He—I believed he stabbed one of our own people and one of our people from our battalion interfered him—with him—and they—he got a knife wound out of it, but they did get a hold of this guy. And they give him a Purple Heart because of it, and a courageous medal besides that.

Jim: Yeah.

Dennis: He just went kinda nutso or—crazy. Striking out at—for some reason, I don't know—just struck out at one of our own people and—

Jim: One of the problems that I've heard is everybody—of course—is everyone was smokin' dope. What about that? Was that a--?

Dennis: No, sir. No. We had a—

Jim: Your group seemed to be pretty good?

Dennis: I—well there's two people I know of—

Jim: Who got into it pretty heavy?

Dennis: No, not really heavy, but it cost them—he was—he was confined to camp for the rest of our tour. He was actually sleeping on duty. Well, he got drugged up and then when I made my post check I come around and--I was with the OD [officer of the day] that night, you know, the Lieutenant. And we're walkin' along and then they just holler "halt"--and then you give the password or whatever--and I'm walkin' along and this guy didn't holler and he--and we were well within range, so I hit the dirt. The Lieutenant--

[End of Tape One, Side One]

Dennis: --standin' there, he says, "What's wrong?" I said, "Get down." I said, "There's something wrong up there because he didn't answer." It was black—you couldn't see nothin'—but I knew where the post was. So we both—he said, "You go around the back, I'll come around this way" and we both crawled up on a hooch [slang for thatched hut] about 50 yards—our out-post there. Here he was sleeping outside the bunker—had his rifle across his lap, sound asleep. And the Lieutenant says, "Wake him up." [laughs] Not 'til you grab that rifle first! [both laugh]

Jim: That's good.

Dennis: I'm not touching him when he got a loaded rifle in his hands—'cause he's gonna think O' Holy Hell got a hold of him.

Jim: Yeah, he won't know who the heck you are until after he shoots.

Dennis: Right. So the Lieutenant—he made a quick snap of the rifle off his chest and I jumped on top of him. Well this--he literally threw me about six feet. I mean that's how scared—

Jim: He was so surprised—

Dennis: Yeah, he was—he just—

Jim: He assumed you were the enemy.

Dennis: Exactly. I mean--he surprised me with the power. I mean—I was—I think it's a third bigger.

Jim: You were surprised? He was terrified. [laughs]

Dennis: Exactly, yeah. My God, he wasn't that big of a person, but the fear—he just lifted me.

Jim: He saw death in the eyes.

Dennis: Right, and the little--then stepped in and—

Jim: So, so, what'd we do then? He got sent back home then?

Dennis: Well, no. He—we took him off—relieved him of duty that night. And the next day we had a little hearing.

Jim: Took his stripes away from him?

Dennis: No, they just confined him to camp.

Jim: What was your rank at this time?

Dennis: I was a second-class petty officer.

Jim: Second class?

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: So he didn't really get punished hard at all then?

Dennis: No. He—very lightly. I thought all your life—

Jim: Sleeping on duty in World War One would get you shot.

Dennis: You bet.

Jim: I mean without any question.

Dennis: Right. That's—

Jim: Not even a formal inquest.

Dennis: Right. The lax of discipline there I thought was really—

Jim: Was it disappointing?

Dennis: Yes, very. Very, very, very.

Jim: Yeah, because that's a killing offense.

Dennis: This is—you got--you're here to protect 900 people sleeping—

Jim: You're responsible for the lot of them.

Dennis: Yes. And he's sleeping on duty. I—I—to this day I have trouble with that.

Jim: Yeah, I would have trouble too. That's—as I said—even in World War Two a lot of guys were shot for the same offense.

Dennis: Right.

Jim: They slept in a combat area.

Dennis: But as far as this drug deal—no. I don't--

Jim: You didn't--From what I've—

Dennis: If they did, I didn't see it. They didn't do it in front of me.

Jim: From what I understand, most of this problem was the guys who were in the jungle—who spent some time in the jungle—they were all trying to—
[phone rings]

Dennis: Well, most of the people that I know today that do—

Jim: Sorry.

Dennis: --smoke this stuff—they had--right—hand to hand--on-line combat, yes.
[phone rings again]

Jim: So that falls in with what I've been given to understand.

Dennis: Yes, well—[woman answers phone, talk is inaudible]--they lived hell, you know? It was kill or be killed.

Jim: Right, so they—so what the hell.

Dennis: Well, when I was in service I played craps and cards and a hundred dollars was nothing because you didn't know if you were going to be alive tomorrow.

- Jim: What about drinking? Did you have access to beer and alcohol?
- Dennis: Oh yeah, we had—well you had to be—you had to be a second class—you had to be an E-5 or second-class petty officer in order to get whiskey. Anybody below an E-5 for rank—they could only get beer.
- Jim: Was that because they assumed age—that you're old enough?
- Dennis: No, rank I guess. That was their privilege.
- Jim: Yeah, but—
- Dennis: It's that—E-5 and up could have any whiskey they wanted.
- Jim: That's the first time I've heard that. That's interesting.
- Dennis: Good. And—
- Jim: Interesting.
- Dennis: I wasn't much of a drinker. Beer would—couple beers for me and—
- Jim: Passing out on Jack Daniels.
- Dennis: Yeah, couple beers—but—
- Jim: But they had beer on your base?
- Dennis: Yes.
- Jim: And the—they called—that you went—
- Dennis: Regular old club, yeah. And they had an officer's club on the side of that. And only the E-5's and up are allowed in there.
- Jim: So they had two clubs then?
- Dennis: In one. In one. But the E-5 and up—you could join the rest, but the E-5 was this other section. They told us one time that—well, all the young people—18 and up—they told us at one time that we consumed more beer—more—how'd they put that? In fluid ounces we consumed more fluid ounces in beer than what New York City did in whiskey. [both laugh] I don't know—I—
- Jim: There was no limit in what you could drink? They didn't restrict you?

Dennis: No, no. We never had no problem with anybody drinking or drunk or—

Jim: This is a problem for the troops in the Second World War and also in Korea. They limited their access to beer.

Dennis: No, we never—

Jim: And whiskey was out for—in most areas.

Dennis: But this here—I have never—I have never seen anybody out of line or abuse anybody from drinking ever. It was one great bunch of guys I thought.

Jim: Do you keep in contact with them?

Dennis: No, I'm kind of a loner I guess.

Jim: Oh.

Dennis: I got all their addresses of the buddies I know—I never—

Jim: You don't send them cards or anything?

Dennis: No. I never did.

Jim: You never? Well. [sighs]. You don't have reunions for you to go to?

Dennis: Yes. I got one on the counter right now for MCB-7. It's gonna be in Rhode Island I think. Boston.

Jim: But you aren't going?

Dennis: Well number one, I don't have the money.

Jim: Oh.

Dennis: [laughs] Number two, my wife is—[inaudible]—just don't have the convenience of the time to go.

Jim: Sure.

Dennis: I'd like to but—[pauses]

Jim: So tell me about your R and R in the Philippines. How'd that go? You took a plane over there?

Dennis: No, that was by the Repose. When I went to the Philippines?

Jim: Yes.

Dennis: That's when I was on the Repose for surgery. I didn't count that R and R.

Jim: Oh, oh. I—tell me about their—I have to back up further—they found a hernia, when?

Dennis: Yeah. Well, I few months into my tour over there and they put me on the Repose and then—

Jim: They fix your hernia?

Dennis: Yeah.

Jim: And then what?

Dennis: Well they docked in Manilla for supplies.

Jim: And you got off?

Dennis: And I got off and went to Manilla.

Jim: Five days?

Dennis: Sight seeing. Yeah, well, I had to come back to the ship. Couldn't stay there. Curfew was one o'clock. And it was pleasant—different country.

Jim: Did you stay away from those girls with all the VD?

Dennis: Uh, [loudly setting something on the table] I didn't get nothin'. [laughs]

Jim: Was there a lot of—lot of service men there I'll bet.

Dennis: Oh yeah, shoulder to shoulder.

Jim: Soothing pains.

Dennis: Yep, shoulder to shoulder. Well there was several, several other ships—there was a port there for our people. I guess the most amazing thing there that I can remember was that they didn't have sewers--

Jim: In--?

- Dennis: In Manilla--there was so big a bay there—because of tidal waves. You walked across a plank if you go across the—well they had trenches there.
- Jim: Trenches and planks over the trenches?
- Dennis: Yes.
- Jim: Yeah, pretty grim.
- Dennis: Yeah, I mean for '66 it's a—
- Jim: That was a shock.
- Dennis: Yes.
- Jim: When I went in to the land in the Crib—we took some tours into the interior Crib off the hospital ship. We exchanges with some Army folk—the Army medics came aboard our ship and we—[Dennis coughs] went and assumed their position at the aide station on land. So they had an idea that we'd all enjoy that. So I did that for four days.
- Dennis: That'd be interesting. But it's something you'll never see any other time in your life.
- Jim: Almost went [claps hands together once] stepped on a mine—a land mine—wandering out looking for the head. I didn't know what the hell it was.
- Dennis: [laughs] Yeah.
- Jim: And they stopped me before I got out too far and blew my foot off. But anyway--I was impressed with the abject of poverty. I mean, there's nothing like that in Wisconsin—I just—Those people are dirt poor. I mean just living like animals.
- Dennis: They're--my father in law—he was in several concentration camps—he come from Ukrania—Yugoslavia—and they took a trip back to Germany five years ago and he says nothing has changed from '50. Gasoline—they still smuggling gasoline--a pint or quart of gas to go anywhere. Still had the outhouse two miles from the house, you know? Nothing's changed. He had his sister and brother still living there.
- Jim: That's pretty sad.
- Dennis: Yes.

- Jim: So, you just did sightseeing in Manila and--?
- Dennis: Yep. That's--
- Jim: But you didn't have—you didn't know anybody there?
- Dennis: Well your guys on ship—well, again in service—I guess the guys that slept next to ya last night or somethin' "You wanna go to town?"
- Jim: Oh, absolutely.
- Dennis: You don't have to have a high school buddy.
- Jim: Right. You met anybody on your tour that was from around here?
- Dennis: I joined the service with Danny Mernard. We was in on that buddy system. Well, it turned out after boot camp that he got Vietnam and I got Rhode Island. [laughs] I never seen him—
- Jim: You never saw him again?
- Dennis: Never saw him again, no. I looked him up after service when he was home. I'm just not as close—personal with people, I guess.
- Jim: Your hernia operation went okay?
- Dennis: Yes sir, yes. Excellent. Very good.
- Jim: When I got back to Great Lakes—my second half of my tour was spent in Great Lakes—but [unintelligible]. Yeah, I used to get the spinal—and things for hernia that were sure to help, so I did both [both laugh]. And the core man, just me and the core man—the two of us—would do all this stuff.
- Dennis: Everything. Yeah that was the first time I ever went into surgery that I can remember and they gave me the spinal tap—must have been a new man on the block—
- Jim: Couldn't hit it?
- Dennis: He hit the nerve in my left leg and I kicked the doctor in the belly and put him up. I almost put him out. I kicked him in the belly--I said, "I didn't mean that, doc." He said, "It's not your fault. Pull it out, you're in the wrong spot." He hit the nerve.
- Jim: He put it too far laterally.

- Dennis: Okay, but he hit the nerve and it scared me right there. You're wide awake. He said, "Okay, he's ready," I says, "No I'm not. I'm not sleepin' yet." [both laugh] He says, "You're ready." I saw the scalpel—I gotta shut my eyes—next thing I know I'm wakin' up. Yeah. They did a nice job.
- Jim: So, when you got back home did you join any Veterans organizations?
- Dennis: Yeah, I joined the American Legion and I'm--the VVA [Vietnam Veterans of America] and the Merit Chapter.
- Jim: Is that an active Chapter?
- Dennis: Yes, In Marinette. It's council 3-9-9.
- Jim: Do you meet once a month?
- Dennis: Yep, yep.
- Jim: What's your main activity?
- Dennis: Basically discuss whatever's available--like the benefits for you or the different projects that groups do for—
- Jim: For kids?
- Dennis: For kids. And setting flags up—general things for the public--what could be done and aren't gettin' done.
- Jim: That's great. And VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars]? Is that two?
- Dennis: Yes, yes. Done three—American Legion, VFW, and VAA.
- Jim: Yeah, the VFW is the only one that I've—they only like me because I keep gettin' requests for money about once a week.
- Dennis: [laughs] I just sent mine back.
- Jim: Jesus. You don't even think—there's no end to it.
- Dennis: Yeah. Well they—if it—
- Jim: And they send me these stickers and I feel—well if I'm gonna use the stickers—so I always send them five dollars. But then Jesus, it seems like two weeks later—

- Dennis: Get another one?
- Jim: I get another one. So I return about—I think one in five. Every fifth one I send ‘em somethin’ back. It’s just too much. They just never—between that and that World War Two memorial in Washington that they’re trying to build—I sent ‘em twenty dollars when that first came out and then three months later I had forgotten that I sent the first twenty dollars. Now they’re on me like--[claps hands together]
- Dennis: Yeah, I think they got your number.
- Jim: Right, now I get—Bob Dole—“this is a personal letter from Bob Dole and I want to be sure that you understand what we’re building and we need your help.”
- Dennis: I got another little incident here.
- Jim: Oh, good. Tell me.
- Dennis: When we come home, all of us people from Vietnam [sounds of adjusting the microphone] were considered baby killers.
- Jim: Well, not by everybody.
- Dennis: Well, the general public. Not as far as the Veterans.
- Jim: Many.
- Dennis: We kind of just accepted it for years. It was exactly twenty--twenty-three years before I got so much as even a thank you or a recognition.
- Jim: From?
- Dennis: From the government of any official closure or appreciation. They had a—
- Jim: What was it?
- Dennis: Well they actually made a water fountain in Marinette by the courthouse, but this wasn’t until after the Gulf War. And when we come home—like I said—they--we were almost scorned—the fact that you were over there and you did this and you shot babies and da-da-da-da. Lot of people get caught up in a war, I’m sure. Babies were killed on one end, too. But the news media today--that’s probably why we got in there to start with—was because of the news media. Okay, then—well in any case—the Gulf War--these people were over there what, three weeks? Four weeks? They had a nine million dollar ticker-tape parade in New York and glorified—

- Jim: That's politics. That's what that is.
- Dennis: Well, it—I think that really pissed a lot of Vietnam—
- Jim: Well, [coughs] I'll tell you something that's worse. They built a [coughs] monument to the Korean Veterans. It was put up last year.
- Dennis: Now that's sad.
- Jim: And that's even longer—
- Dennis: Right. That's sick. That's--for our government—for these people putting their lives up—
- Jim: And the guys came home in '53. And it was last year in '99—'53 to '99—for the first statue in the state of Wisconsin. It was down in Clover. Jesus.
- Dennis: Well this is what I'm getting' at right here.
- Jim: Well it's the same thing.
- Dennis: Same difference. Yeah.
- Jim: Yeah, when I came back [laughs] well its funny now, but it pissed me off at the time. When the hospital ship came back—I had been there a year, you know? I was really feeling good about myself—saving the world, you know? [laughs]
- Dennis: Oh yeah, you felt that you had served a country.
- Jim: [laughs] I come in to this hotel in San Francisco and I registered—signed me in—and here am I with my blue uniform and all the ribbons and all that and I'm signing in and the fella says, “Are you here for the convention?” [both laugh] There was a medical convention there. [Jim laughs]
- Dennis: But that--I think—that the Gulf War really put the topping for the attitude of the Vietnam Vets. That—the glorification that they got for absolutely nothing.
- Jim: Well that movie that Tom Cruise did I think helped the cause. And a lot of people saw that and then began to realize how severe some of this—how traumatic it really was.

- Dennis: Right. Exactly. Well that's—look--you live with that, like I said, twenty three years before—I've been out several—lots of times, you know, just out—and get talkin' to different people and I had exactly one person—a civilian I'd never met, never seen before—we got talking Vietnam and da-da and I'd never seen this girl before and she said, “Thank you for serving the country,” and the only one I'd ever had.
- Jim: Yeah they don't—as a matter of fact--the youngsters now that I see come down to the museum for tours—we give 'em tours [coughs] because they don't know Korea, Vietnam.
- Dennis: No, no, no. That's in the past. That's in the history books.
- Jim: Yeah, that's all. Well, one kid said, “My grandfather was in the war.” I said, “Oh really, what war?” He said, “I think it was the Civil War.” I said, “Probably not.” You know? [laughs] They just don't understand.
- Dennis: No—well this is--they don't wanna. They're too wrapped up—they're too busy with their own life to—
- Jim: Didn't affect them.
- Dennis: No. Don't bother me. I didn't hafta go.
- Jim: Yeah, all the students there—just became part of our lives, you know?
- [Blank Section, silence]**
- Dennis: Yes, and we're in combat over there and we're talking embassy for these people.
- Jim: Alright, you know who was—who almost went to Canada don't ya? Al Gore. Al Gore had a decision to make and he finally decided that that was one of the considerations that he had to make. Well, so what? Uh, never mind.
- Dennis: Let's talk about the president.
- Jim: Pardon?
- Dennis: Let's talk about the president.
- Jim: The present one?
- Dennis: The present one.

Jim: Or the two goofs that are—one of whom is gonna take his place.

Dennis: [laughs] Well, it's—

Jim: My candidate is sittin' in Arizona—John McCain is the guy. But, you know. I've interviewed the guy who's the head of the—with him.

Dennis: Another thing, you were askin' me about drugs in Vietnam. You got a president that admits to having drugs—smoking drugs, dodging the draft, and he's our chief commander?

Jim: Right.

Dennis: That ain't hardly right.

Jim: Course not. I didn't vote for him. But, you know.

Dennis: [laughs] I mean he wasn't—

Jim: See, it's not important to some people.

Dennis: No, it must not be. To a military person, I believe it is. Because he avoided the draft—I joined, I didn't have to—I joined. That was m—that was my choice.

Jim: A lot of people don't have a feeling for history. Guys like you and I are—feel for it. Of course, my great grandfather was in the Civil War.

Dennis: My grandfather was in the Civil War.

Jim: Sure, so you have a certain feeling.

Dennis: One of my uncles was killed in the Second War.

Jim: My father was in the First World War.

Dennis: It's pride of the family I guess—I don't know. I had a cousin that—he's two years older—he joined the Army and he come home in an Army uniform and boy, someday I'm gonna try this out.

Jim: One of my close friends is a [inaudible] in Omaha.

Dennis: Oh boy.

- Jim: Off the ship first—off the landing craft first. [sighs] It's hard to even tell you this. [laughs] And it didn't even happen to me. But, he said, all these guys are falling property, because they had too much weight--
- Dennis: Too much weight and it didn't come in close enough.
- Jim: --had about twelve feet or more, and he said, "I could swim with it, I got to the shore." But Jesus. He says, "I knew, I got it. I can't be scared, because I don't want to let down my mother and my father." That was his motivation. Yeah—
- Dennis: Right, well that's—they don't want them people comin' here, that's why you went over there. That's the reason why you went there.
- Jim: Well, anyway. It's impressive. It motivates people.
- Dennis: That's what—again, if you're willing to go to Canada and leave your mother—parents—loved ones here and then come back--why would you wanna come back? You deserted them.
- Jim: I couldn't imagine—yeah, I would think that the only reason to go to Canada is if you wanna stay. If you wanna go—
- Dennis: Exactly. Go? Go. Stay here then.
- Jim: There's another way out, but if you do go—stay there.
- Dennis: Stay there, right.
- Jim: It's comin back that just shames your whole family.
- Dennis: Well, I just—gut feeling would be the people. In that sense. They don't [sighs] they won't have the privilege of bein' in the United States if that's all they thought about.
- Jim: I agree with that. I've done several Vietnam Vets and two of 'em were Wisconsin guys who were Medal of Honor winners. They were from Wisconsin. Just Reiner England who was at Urma, you know where Urma is?
- Dennis: No.
- Jim: It's up near Tomahawk.
- Dennis: I don't know where Tomahawk is, but I've been through a train back in—

- Jim: It's right out side of [inaudible] Jesus, the left side of his face was shot away--charging at a machine gunner and single handedly wiping them out.
- Dennis: I'm sure.
- Jim: And then there was a guy—another Wisconsin guy—I went down to Peori, Illinois—and he was an officer—and had a group of about twenty-two that were caught with ambush on the number one—highway one.
- Dennis: Boy, that was a big ambush road.
- Jim: Right, they fought their way out. And he saved 'em from complete destruction. But, ended up with a sword in one hand and a .45 in the other and screamin' at these kids to keep shootin' at him or give up shootin'. To listen to that tale was unbelievable.
- Dennis: I'm sure. Yeah.
- Jim: So, I don't know what else to ask you here. What medals did you get? I didn't ask you that.
- Dennis: Just your Vietnam Campaign medal—that I was there.
- Jim: Don't you get a citation for doing all this?
- Dennis: No.
- Jim: Well you should've. I would think they should've.
- Dennis: I don't see it. I don't know.
- Jim: Yeah, you may have one unknown.
- Dennis: I—could be. Like I said, I captured this guy at the gate.
- Jim: Right.
- Dennis: But I'd rather forget it than be glorified for it.
- Jim: No, I understand. Sure. Well—
- Dennis: I mean I know—I don't know gospel truth for sure, but I'm sure he isn't in prison anymore.
- Jim: Oh, I'm sure he isn't. That's right.

- Dennis: I could have just as well told him to get away or pull the trigger—did the same thing as if I shot him myself, you know? It was him or me—that’s how I looked at it. I said, “Keep your hands there—don’t move.” And we all cried right there. Everybody.
- Jim: Because of the tenseness?
- Dennis: Oh just, yeah.
- Jim: That sort of relief from that tension—is that what did it? I suppose.
- Dennis: I don’t know. It’s a feeling I never want again. That—I’m a real avid trap shooter and I love weapons—I got—I love weapons of all sorts and to put it on another man and know I am not gonna miss—that just—
- Jim: A responsibility you hadn’t planned on?
- Dennis: No. No. I mean—you can probably spray a village or shoot at someone—return fire—‘cause you don’t see ‘em, but when he’s standing two feet in front of you—no mistake.
- Jim: It’s quite different.
- Dennis: It’s him or me.
- Jim: There’s nobody else to blame.
- Dennis: Right.
- Jim: Just me.
- Dennis: That’s it. But my chums there said, “You’re crazy.” “Zoellner,” he said, “You’re crazy. You just flipped.” I says, “You lock and load—the First Sergeant is coming.” And it wasn’t a pretty picture.
- Jim: You did the right thing. You were called upon and you responded.
- Dennis: Thank you.
- Jim: That’s very good. That’s commendable. It really is.
- Dennis: Like I said, what bothered me was this guy sleeping. That really--
- Jim: Right, that’s just the reverse of that.

- Dennis: Yes, yes, yes. I mean a simple job—he slept all day—there’s no excuse for him to be sleepin’ there. But as far as drugs on our camp--I honestly—I—zero. Like I said, I think it involved more people that were actually living in the jungle—the tenseness—and it probably—I don’t know.
- Jim: That’s been my experience.
- Dennis: I’ve had several people come to—“well, what is it like?” I says, “What?” “Marijuana.” I says, “I don’t know.” I’ve been by people both the United States and there—different places--but if they’re smokin’ drugs I get outta the room. I got friends of mine that I quit—don’t even come over.
- Jim: Oh, at this time?
- Dennis: Yes. Don’t even come over to my house because I don’t want you around my son. He said, “Well you were there, you musta tried—everybody that’s been in the service smoked drugs.” I said, “No, no.”
- Jim: That’s not so.
- Dennis: I had a little trouble—
- Jim: That’s an excuse he’s trying to land.
- Dennis: Exactly. I got enough trouble with Budweiser.
- Jim: [laughs] That’s dope enough for me.
- Dennis: Yeah, that’s enough for me. Couple o’ them and I’m ready to go to bed.
[both laugh]
- Jim: Yeah I’ve graduated. I used to drink beer all the time, now I drink Jack Daniels.
- Dennis: That’s good stuff.
- Jim: Because I like it. Just with ice. Jack on the rocks—that’s—I really enjoy it. Trouble is—health benefits--
- Dennis: That ain’t all leaves.
- Jim: Because that’s like eatin’ candy bars. So, I keep saying that I should go back to beer—light beer—and eat a lot less calories. But that’s not what I really want.
- Dennis: [laughs] Right.

- Jim: That's not what tastes good to me.
- Dennis: But I got a chum o' mine too—he—beer drinkin' and that's all he drank. He wouldn't drink whiskey. Now, he's pure whiskey. I says, "Well how come you don't drink beer anymore?" "Well," he says, "I can start drinkin' beer at five o'clock—I'm still drinkin' beer at two in the mornin'. If I drink whiskey I'm out cold at eight." [laughs] Don't take so long.
- Jim: That's right. Definitely. My wife and I are quite differently. She never wants to go to bed.
- Dennis: Oh, well I don't ever have that.
- Jim: And after I've had a big meal and two Jack Daniels—
- Dennis: I'm ready for bed. Yeah.
- Jim: Eight o'clock--sometimes earlier. Well, I'm tired. I can't read at that hour—and I do a lot of reading. But after that, I can't read. And then, the television is good—I can sit up and watch that for a little bit, but never after nine.
- Dennis: No, oh no.
- Jim: And so I get up, usually about two. House is quiet. My wife's just gone to bed. [both laugh] She stays in bed until about ten. So I have the house to myself, I can do all my reading--all my power thinking--nobody bothers me and I go feed my ducks out on a pond we have out there and it's just—
- Dennis: Serenity. Just your peace of the day.
- Jim: Just—then the newspapers come and I do the crossword puzzle and—
- Dennis: Yeah I like to sit on the front porch like you said—two thirty in the morning with a full moon and watch the deer come out and—get to watch your deer—they come in here every night—it's really just enjoyable.
- Jim: Do you feed them?
- Dennis: Oh yeah. Well I got—
- Jim: Then when they come close enough you throw a rope around their neck and drag them in?

- Dennis: Ah, that's before the two thousand dollar fine come out here. [both laugh] DNR got a big smoke yesterday up in Crivitz on this—about tracking the deer herd. They said all they got to do is take that two thousand dollar fine off—back then it was a hundred dollars.
- Jim: To control the deer herd?
- Dennis: If they wanna control the deer--take the fine off. They didn't have no trouble before that fine come.
- Jim: It's amazing that it took 'em so long to figure out that the deer there are killing—well—the wrong ones. They shoulda been shootin' these doe long ago and we wouldn't have four and a half million deer.
- Dennis: Remember the buck—strictly buck—and it took five people to get a doe license? Now it's all does.
- Jim: Now it's does. Right.
- Dennis: Just the opposite. You have to shoot a doe to get a buck.
- Jim: It's a little late.
- Dennis: Yes. Well, damage to the—the roads—there's deer every couple hundred yards on the highway.
- Jim: Well most of it's done entirely. But people there depend on their crops. Those deer are like big rabbits—that's what they are.
- Dennis: They—right here—about five square miles back here—I got one mile along side here that's fine—quarter mile wide by a mile—we hunt both ends of eighty here—a hundred and sixty acres—and I would say in the '70's that—I'll show you pictures here after we're done here—I had three to six hundred deer in twenty-five acres.
- Jim: Three hundred deer?
- Dennis: Three hundred deer right in my yard here at that time.
- Jim: Jesus.
- Dennis: Now we got them new Asians comin out here—the Hmong. Well they go in there—they got about fifty, sixty guys in there shootin' everything up. Big, small, they don't care what.
- Jim: If it moves, it's shot.

Dennis: Yeah, well I guess the sad part is they're destroying the future for any—you shooting a yearling fawn—you wait two years you're gonna have three hundred pounds of meat instead of ten pounds. And—well that's their business anyhow. But I got pictures here—you can count 'em. You can look out every window in this house—there's deer standing as far as you can see. And—they're still here—just that they're--

Jim: What would they eat out there? Just grass?

Dennis: Well no, they come up to my garden—I got it all—I got pads all over the bottom there to scare them—plastic around the outside.

Jim: Otherwise they'll eat everything in the garden.

Dennis: Oh, they'll clean me right out.

Jim: They're not partial to—anything that's green they'll eat?

Dennis: They'll eat. The roses, the flowers, my apple trees—I got—

Jim: Eat the flowers?

Dennis: Oh yeah. Roses.

Jim: Even though the roses got prickles on 'em?

Dennis: They're pick the rose right off. Yeah, take the top of the rose right off.

Jim: [laughs]

Dennis: My trees are all fenced in so they can't get it. In fact there's one right out the window—it's just a stem—they just broke that the other night. They pull on the top and it's pulled far enough—and it's only a little twig—and it snap right in half. So I gotta fence every tree until it get big enough or high enough to where they can't get the leaves on it. In fact, two years ago—night before season—

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

Dennis: My whole group was out here. So, that day I said, "I'll just hang around the garage here." And they all went out into the field. Got day light and I'm lookin at the orchard—I don't remember that tree. There's something wrong with that tree over there. It's as white as a candle. Night before season this buck come in and rubbed that tree bone—right there--took the

bark right off it the night before season. I said, “Boy, I’m gonna wait for him. I’m gonna get this guy.”

Jim: It’s a big one?

Dennis: No, no. It had been a little one pickin’ his turf out this close. The big one thought, “I don’t wanna get this close.” [laughs]

Jim: They’re smarter.

Dennis: Yeah. So, I’m waitin’ and waitin’ and we’re in the garage—and back then we were really havin’ a beer after huntin’. We don’t—we only hunt until ten o’clock—the rest of the day is partying. And, have a look outside—I got a little LP [liquid propane] tank outside—and that little buck was so close to my LP tank that I couldn’t shoot it from the garage. I went around—jump—sittin’ on the front porch and I went around chasin’ it in the front yard and he went right past ‘em—right through the front yard—he said, “I didn’t have the heart to shoot ‘em.” Everybody, “Aww.” [both laugh]

Jim: He’ll be back.

Dennis: He’ll be back.

Jim: Bigger. Alright, I can’t think of anything else to ask you.

Dennis: That’s the best I can tell you. I hope.

Jim: That’s good. That’s very good, in fact. Alright.

Dennis: Just my book and—my—

Jim: Yeah I wanna take a look at some of that stuff.

Dennis: Put that thing up there—just undo that.

Jim: [coughs]

[End of Interview]