

**Rick Claggett**

*How would you describe your childhood?*

I had a loving normal happy childhood.

*Is it a tradition in your family to serve in the military?*

No, my parents (and my siblings and I) were Quakers and they didn't believe in war. I was the only one of my siblings to go in the military.

*At what age did you get in contact with the military?*

I was drafted into the Army out of Graduate School in 1970- at the age of 23.

*How old were you when you first heard about the war in Vietnam, when was that?*

I had heard of the war beginning about 1964 (I was 17) and got more familiar with it with each year. In the late 60's I sure was aware of it and hoping against hope, not to have to go myself.

*What did you know about Vietnam, the communists and the Vietnamese armed forces (regulars and militia) before you went there?*

Damn little because as I said, I was hoping to avoid it and didn't want to know anything more than I knew people were dying and I didn't want to be included in that. Once I got drafted, Basic training, Infantry training, and dog handlers school all stressed what we'd be doing in Vietnam.

*What motivation did you have to join the army?*

I had no motivation since I didn't want to go.

*Were you drafted?*

I was drafted.

*What did/do you think about the draft system?*

I wasn't in favour of the draft since I lost it! Before that, I thought it was the most fair way to get the numbers they needed. My only concern about it was if you "knew someone", somehow you could get out of it.

*Do you think the draftees were distributed equally on the different ethnicities? Did you make any experiences concerning that topic you think are worth mentioning (e.g a notable majority of an ethnicity in a unit)?*

I don't know about ethnicity but like I said above, if you didn't know anyone important- you got drafted. I will say that people who claim this was a war the Black man fought for the White man is wrong. Statistically, a higher percentage of white men were killed than proportionally in the population. (I am white).

*Do you think the draftees were equally distributed over the different states? Did you make any experiences concerning this topic you think are worth mentioning (e.g a notable majority of soldiers recruited out of a single state or region)?*

I have no information or opinion on draftee distribution. It seemed pretty across the board to me.

*What unit(s) did you serve in?*

The Army assigned me to the 23rd Infantry Division. When they stood down, I was assigned to the 196 Infantry Brigade. I then transferred to the 48th Infantry Platoon Scout Dogs.

*How long and when did you serve?*

I had Basic at Ft. Dix, N.J., Infantry training at Ft. Polk, La., dog handlers training at Ft. Gordon, Ga and then Da Nang, S. Vietnam for a total of 1 year, 8 months.

*What were your duties and tasks?*

I assume you mean the Vietnam portion. In Infantry I was a radio man. When I transferred to the dog platoon, I was a Scout Dog Handler. Scout Dogs lead patrols in the bush and alert us on human and mechanical ambushes.

*Describe your every-day life.*

When I was in the field (generally about 5 of 7 days) I was with my dog 24-7. He led patrols, I followed and interpreted what he alerted on. We'd normally spend a couple hours a day on patrols. The rest of the time we were moving as a Unit or in a night time perimeter.

*Describe your unit.*

Since I would be assigned to any Unit that wanted a dog team, I generally didn't know anyone I

was in the field with. I would sleep near but away from others in the central perimeter with only my dog. I really never knew the names of many of the other guys since I'd be with a different Unit the next mission. I had a much tighter relationship with my fellow dog handlers that I'd see when I was back in the rear until I went out again. We'd go to shows, bars, play sports, etc.

*Describe the atmosphere in your unit.*

My dog guys were tight. We relied on each other and our dogs for sanity. Surviving without them would have been difficult.

*Did you see combat? If yes, how long?*

Yes, I saw combat nearly every time I was in the field. Sometimes it was just booby traps but sometimes direct gunfire and mortars. And it was pretty much the whole 8 months I was in Vietnam.

*Do you think the men that served in Vietnam were well educated and able?*

Most Vietnam "grunts" were not educated beyond high school (if that!). Our dog guys were far more educated with maybe ½ dozen of us with college degrees. As far as the ability, most did a great job with what they were given for training. But nothing really prepares you for a war situation.

*Do you think the officers you were commanded by were well educated and able?*

Officers were for the most part, well educated but many were far more interested in moving up in rank than they might have been in protecting the lives of their men. The several I had were pretty good however.

*From which social class do you think did the average American soldier in Vietnam come? What do you think was their background?*

The average age of an infantry man in Vietnam was 18 ½ years old and maybe had a high school education. I think they by and large were a lower to middle class.

*How were you treated by other soldiers, officers and the army in general?*

Because I was educated and I wasn't making the military a career, I wasn't hassled much. I was

treated pretty good. I didn't really worry about such things as rank, ribbons, etc. as other guys did who were looking at making the military a career. I just did my job and was left alone.

*What were you afraid of the most during the war?*

Dying! I did all I could to prevent that. I took no unnecessary risks. I did my job to the best of my abilities and my sole effort was directed toward keeping myself, my dog, and the guys I was with at the time, safe.

*How did you think of your enemies?*

I didn't hate the enemy. I figured they didn't want to be in war either. But given a choice between me and other Americans and them dying, I wanted it to be them who died. I respected them for their fighting abilities against overpowering resources (if we would have used all our available resources!)

*Who did you think were your enemies, what was their goal?*

In some respects, the enemy was also our own Country. Vietnam was a war that didn't have the support of our own Country. We could have won it with that support. In some respects, we were fighting on two fronts. Our enemies and our home front.

*What did/do you think was your mission in Vietnam, why were you there?*

We were told over and over our mission was to stem the tide of Communism and give S. Vietnam their freedom. Easier said than done!

*Did your opinion on your enemies change before, during, after the war?*

Yeah, it changed. When I got there, I quickly realized it was a war we couldn't win. I went from trying to win the war to trying to survive- again, me, my dog, and the guys I was with.

*Did a relation between you/your unit in general and the locals exist? If yes, how would you describe it?*

We didn't have much interaction with our "allies", the S. Vietnamese. Some wanted us there, many did not. for one thing, the locals didn't like our dogs- they were afraid of them, so they stayed away from our Unit area.

*How would you describe the supply that your unit received (food, water, ammunition, medical supplies)?*

Our food in the field was C-rations. We had hot foods in the rear- that was better. We were given most of the supplies we needed.

*Did you suffer a traumatic incident?*

Traumatic incidents-maybe twice. I didn't have time to get scared in combat situations- that would come after it was over. But once, my dog and I were guarding a downed chopper one time and the last chopper came in to pick us up but only had room for me and said they'd come back for the dog. Naturally, I wouldn't leave my dog so the chopper left us both and said they'd send another out. We were all alone for maybe 15 minutes but it was the longest 15 minutes I ever spent. The enemy knew where we were with choppers around, etc. and they always come in to pick up ammo and food that we may have dropped. Big Boy (my dog) and I would be pretty defenceless against all of them. Luckily, no one came before the chopper did. The most traumatic for me however, was leaving my dog in Vietnam when our Unit stood down. They weren't used anymore and we wanted to take them home with us but weren't allowed. They should have been able to return with us but that wasn't allowed in the Vietnam war. That law is changed now but too late to help our dogs there. That's one reason I like to give talks on our dogs to let people know what they did.

*Do you know anyone who suffered a traumatic incident?*

Yeah, I had friends who died there. I got off lucky.....

*Are there any events/incidents you remember in a special way--positive, negative, dangerous, etc?*

Besides what I said in #30, I remember more the good happy time with the guys and my dog. Going to shows like the Bob Hope show with my dog, going to clubs, bars, etc. with my buddies. But there is one aspect I have to deal with now. I was exposed to Agent Orange. In the past 10 years, I've lost much of my hearing, I'm now a Type 2 diabetic, and I had a heart attack in 2007- all of which the VA says could have been from Agent Orange exposure. I'm on 40% disability

now from the VA and am trying for more. My life will probably be shortened from that war but a good life it's been.

*What is your comment on the widespread rumours/ theories that claim that a big part of the American soldiers that served in the Vietnam War came from a low/poor social class and that many of them were trained insufficiently?*

See my #10 answer. Yes, it may have been more of the lower of middle class that served but it's not true that uneducated minorities suffered more of the casualties. Statistics say otherwise.

*Do you think you benefited from the time you spent serving in the military?*

I wouldn't have said it even 10 years ago, but now after reflecting, I do think I'm a better person for having served. I'm proud I was there. I'm thankful I've had a great life where some 58,000 names are on that wall in Wash. DC who would have loved a shot with what they could have done with life. Life's too short to be bitter.

*Assuming you could be young again: Would you serve again, even knowing the outcome of the war?*

Yeah, if called, I would serve again. I have 2 sons in the Army today. That was there choice and I'm behind them.