

Rick Owen

Where were you born?

I was born in, and still live in, Louisville, KY.

How would you describe your childhood?

My childhood was pretty interesting. I spent most of it growing up on a small farm not far from where I live now (unfortunately, the farm long ago became a subdivision). My father grew up on a farm in a neighbouring county during the Depression, and was always trying to be involved in farming again (he was a maintenance foreman for DuPont). At various times we raised hogs, had layer chickens (their purpose was to lay eggs for resale), rented the farm to a dairy farmer, and then we ended up boarding horses for several years, until my parents sold the farm. I got to spend a great deal of time outdoors, hunting and fishing, as well as doing chores. It was a pretty good time. I learned to do many things that most of my friends didn't know how to do.

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

There is no tradition of service in my family. My father tried to enlist in the Navy during WWII, but was rejected because of a very large birthmark on his back. The Army also rejected him; they were afraid that carrying a pack on his back could cause the birthmark to turn cancerous.

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

I was 18 when I first visited a recruiter.

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

I'm not sure how old I was when I first heard of Vietnam; probably around 15 or 16, in late 1964 or in 1965.

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

I was fairly naive about the situation at first. All I knew was that the communists were trying to take South Vietnam and unite it with North Vietnam, and that everyone (mostly) thought that we

had to stop them from doing this. Before I graduated from high school in 1967, I worried more about being outside and hanging with a few friends. Vietnam wasn't on my mind that much, until I turned 18, and the draft started taking more people. After I graduated, I spent more time learning about Vietnam, but still didn't know that much.

What motivation did you have to join the army?

I enlisted in the US Air Force in April, 1968. My motivation was that I didn't want to get drafted into the Army. Job choices were not nearly as good, and I didn't particularly want to be in the infantry.

Were you drafted?

See #7.

What did/do you think about the draft system?

I can't think of anyone who liked the draft. Anyone who wanted to serve volunteered to enlist. I do think that the draft was necessary to supply the manpower necessary to go make a mess of Vietnam. I also think a draft should exist today. Far too few people volunteer for the military, and those who do bear too great a burden in terms of the amount of deployments they serve. My son is in the Army National Guard. He has friends he graduated with who served 4 years active duty with the Army, and one of them spent nearly 3 years of the 4 in either Iraq or Afghanistan. That wears a person out, literally, as well as mentally. Service in the military would also show people what they take for granted, which is a big problem in this country.

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 can't really answer this question, since I wasn't drafted. However, I can speak to the fact that the Air Force and Navy had higher minimums on the tests that everyone who went into the military had to take. There were a number of blacks in my particular job, but I read about Army units that were heavily minority. The saying back in the day was that "Vietnam is a rich man's war, but a poor man's battle." My experience in the Air

Force was that most enlistees came from states with a heavy military presence, i.e., many military bases.

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 also can't answer this question. I did see clusters of people from certain areas or states, but they were also some of the more heavily populated areas.

What unit(s) did you serve in?

The Air Force, unlike the Army or Marines, didn't move people in large units unless they were establishing a new base or changing its mission. These are my duty assignments during my enlistment: 1. Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas, April-June, 1968, for basic training; 2. Lowry AFB, Denver, Colorado, June-October, 1968, for technical school; 3. October, 1968 to April, 1969, Eglin AFB, Ft Walton Beach, Florida, first assignment; 4. Tuy Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam, May, 1969, to October, 1970; 5. England AFB, Alexandria, Louisiana, November, 1970, to April, 1971; 6. Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, May, 1971, to March, 1972. I returned from Da Nang to McChord AFB, Seattle, Washington, for discharge on March 30, 1972.

How long and when did you serve?

See above.

What were your duties and tasks?

Assembling various sorts of munitions, bombs, flares, rockets, napalm and 20mm ammo for the fighter jets and gunships.

My job in the Air Force was called "munitions specialist". I worked in the bomb dump,

Describe your every-day life.

Everyday life was: Get up, go to work, do however much we had to do that day, and go back to the barracks. Lunch was a trip back to the base(bomb dumps are typically at the furthest reaches of the base, to protect the base in case something goes boom when it's not supposed to. That

happened a few times during the Vietnam war.). After work, people had various activities they pursued. Physical fitness was one; hobbies, like photography; sports; recording/listening to music; and partying. Several of my buddies and I played pinochle about every night, smoked(I only smoked cigars), and drank. On a day off, I might go exploring some in the desert near our barracks(my first base), but I never went very far. That base was also on the coast of the South China Sea, so swimming and snorkelling were other activities.

Describe your unit.

I served with guys from all over the country, but it was skewed toward states with Air Force bases. Most were pretty good guys; my career field required a secret security clearance, and you had to be at a high level in the "human reliability manual", because of the nature of the work. That pretty well eliminated the losers, although a few did get through.

Describe the atmosphere in your unit.

The atmosphere was different than what would be in combat units, or other Army units who were in the field. We were on a base that was heavily guarded and protected. People who did the same parts of the job usually hung out together(my career field encompassed many more aspects than what I did). After being in-country for a couple of months, it was like being in the States, other than not being there. Routine set in, and people went on about their business.

Did you see combat? If yes, how long?

I did not see any combat. I never carried a rifle, other than for training or qualification.

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

The Air Force and Navy, as I mentioned before, required higher minimum scores to enlist. My personal opinion is that the Airmen were better educated, overall, than the Army(didn't know any Marines). My best buddy from high school waited to be drafted, and was with the 101st Airborne, near Da Nang. He didn't have much to say about some of the people he served with as far as being very bright.

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

All Air Force officers had to be college graduates, but having an education doesn't equate with having ability. I had a few who were really good, and I had a few that caused me to wonder how they got in. Probably the same as with any organization.

From which social class do you think did the average American soldier in Vietnam come?

What do you think was their background? Most of the Army troops I knew were probably a bit less than middle class, from a slightly lower socio-economic group. However, most of the Airmen I knew came from better backgrounds.

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

I was treated as well as anyone, and maybe better than some. I did my job the best I could, and the people in charge recognized this. My performance at Tuy Hoa earned me the Air Force Commendation Medal. My performance reports also helped me make the maximum rank I could in nearly the minimum time(I was a Staff Sergeant for a year before I was discharged).

What were you afraid of the most during the war?

I didn't spend much time being afraid, except maybe during mortar or rocket attacks. Da Nang was a much more dangerous base than Tuy Hoa. There were rocket attacks quite frequently, compared to a few mortar attacks during my tour at Tuy Hoa. The most afraid I ever was happened less than 2 months before I left Da Nang. We had a rocket attack in early February that came pretty close to my barracks.

How did you think of your enemies?

I didn't think much about the enemy, other than during attacks. Just not in my mind that much. I had other things that kept me occupied.

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

I didn't care much about who the enemy was; it could be any Vietnamese. There was an Army airfield about 3 km south of Tuy Hoa that had helicopter gunships, and the VC hit them with great regularity. Rumour had it that one of the dead VC after one attack was a barber in our base

exchange. Now, that was a sort of scary thought, considering that they used straight razors on our necks when we got haircuts. Whoever the enemy was, their goal was to reunite the two Vietnam's into one.

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

Our mission in Vietnam, so we were told, was to stop the commies from overrunning the world. That was a joke. Vietnam was a civil war, and we should never have been involved. You need to know that the idiots in the US were looking for commies in every closet and under every bed. We weren't that long removed from the McCarthy era, with all the witch hunts, so people were easily led. There were people who actually believed if we didn't stop the commies in Vietnam, we'd be fighting them in Hawaii. What morons!

Did your opinion on your enemies, why you were in Vietnam and what your mission was change (before, during, after the war)?

By the time my first tour was over, I had come to the conclusion that we shouldn't be there, and that we were making a big mess of it. Politicians were calling most of the shots, and they were dumber than a box of rocks. The few decisions made by the military weren't much better, either. There is only one way to fight a war: Fight to win! Anything else is a waste of time, men, and material. I'm proud of my service while I was there, but it was for a wasted effort. (And we didn't end up fighting commies in Hawaii, either.)

Did a relation between you/your unit in general and the locals exist?

If yes, how would you describe it? We had no real relationship with the locals, other than the ones who worked on our base. As I mentioned before, most Air Force bases in Vietnam were closely guarded, and we were restricted to base, other than any official need to go off base.

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

We had no real problem with basic supplies. The Air Force had a different standard of living,

compared to the Army. We had chow halls, barracks with hot showers, a base exchange, movie theatre, gymnasiums, various sports courts, etc. There was one occasion, when I was at Tuy Hoa, when a supply convoy came under attack, and we had to make do for a week or so with whatever soap and toilet paper we had (Tuy Hoa was considered a remote location). I don't remember anyone suffering from it. Da Nang was a major port, so we never had any shortages, other than decent beer.

Did you suffer a traumatic incident?

The closest I had to a traumatic incident would be the attack at Da Nang. A rocket landed about 75 feet from my barracks. It rattled the walls, throwing all sorts of debris onto the roof. To this day, if I hear a sound similar to that, I'm looking for a place to exit. Otherwise, I seem to suffer no ill effects of my service, either mentally or physically.

Do you know anyone who suffered a traumatic incident?

I have a buddy from Virginia who suffers from exposure to Agent Orange, if that's traumatic. He's had a heart attack and has Type 2 diabetes. We worked together for several months, often in very close proximity to each other. Guess I'm just lucky.

Are there any events/incidents you remember in a special way (positive, negative, dangerous, etc.)?

Well, the rocket attack is on the list. Leaving Vietnam was always a good experience. Having the pilot tell you that Vietnam is now in the rear view was wonderful! A funny episode would be when I was at Tuy Hoa. I hadn't been there very long when someone decided to "borrow" some bags of cement from the construction people, so we could build a patio. I was asked to help. We borrowed a truck from the bomb dump, and went to get the cement. This was a spot near the perimeter. The Security Police had guard towers along the perimeter, and one was about 200 yards from us. While we were tossing the cement into the truck, I noticed the guard in the tower looking at us with binoculars, then he got on his radio. I mentioned this to our leader, and suggested that we should leave. We did that, then a jeep full of Security Police was soon

following us. He stopped and the SP asked him what we were doing. He said that one of the supervisors in the bomb dump told us to get it. The SP went back to his jeep and got on the radio. I was sweating bullets, figuring we'd all be busted, and I'd lose my 2 stripes. After what seemed like forever, the SP came back and told us to go. We went into the bomb dump and stayed for a bit before heading back to the barracks. The next day or so we mixed the concrete and poured our patio, and we all had a good laugh about it.

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?

I think that many who were drafted probably came from a lower socio-economic status, but I think they were mostly adequately trained. The only problem I know of was that it was hard to turn a city boy into someone who could recognize all the things they needed to know while out in the bush. My high school buddy told me about this (we both grew up on farms and spent a lot of time outdoors).

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

I definitely benefited from my time in the Air Force. It taught me more about myself than I could have learned in 10 years in civilian life. I learned to value teamwork, to pay attention to details, that I could do much more than I thought I could prior to enlisting, and I learned to be a leader.

Assuming you were you again: Would you serve again, even knowing the outcome of the war?

Yes, I would do it all over again! I (as did most) complained about it every day, but it was one of the most profound experiences of my life. I learned a lot, got to see parts of the world I never would have seen otherwise, and met people from many different parts of the country. Vietnam was/is a beautiful country. It's a shame a war was fought there.