

Interview Agreement

The Marshall University Oral History Program is housed at Marshall University in Smith Hall and documents are available in the Morrow Library.

Tape recordings and transcripts resulting from interviews conducted for the Program are deposited in the Oral History Collection of Marshall University where they are available for historical and other academic research and public dissemination regulated according to any restrictions placed on their use by the interviewee and/or interviewer.

Participation in the Program is entirely voluntary.

We, the undersigned, have read the above and voluntarily offer the Oral History Program at Marshall University use of the information contained on tape recordings and in transcripts of these recordings. In view of the scholarly value of this research material, we hereby assign rights, title and interest pertaining to it to the University.

Connie J. Zirkle

Name of Interviewer

Connie J. Zirkle

Signature

Po Box 867

Address

Proctonville OH 45669

City

State

Zip

11/30/96

Date

Calvin J. Zirkle

Name of Interviewee

Signature

348 Co. Rd 70

Address

Proctonville OH 45669

City

State

Zip

11/30/96

Date 2 Dec. 1986

Calvin Zirkle

TAPE # 1

**SUBJECT: APPALACHIAN PATRIOTISM - AN
INTERVIEW WITH AN UNSUNG HERO**

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: CALVIN J. ZIRKLE

CONDUCTED BY: CONNIE JEAN ZIRKLE

FOR: THE ORAL HISTORY OF APPALACHIA PROGRAM

DATE OF INTERVIEW: NOVEMBER 30, 1996

TRANSCRIPTIONIST/TYPIST: CONNIE JEAN ZIRKLE

APPALACHIAN PATRIOTISM - AN INTERVIEW WITH AN UNSUNG HERO



ORAL HISTORY OF APPALACHIA PROGRAM

SOCIOLOGY OF APPALACHIA
SOC 532
DR. LYNDA ANN EWEN

CONNIE JEAN ZIRKLE
DECEMBER 2, 1996

(Please note all bold plain face print contains questions/comments from the interviewer. The text in italics are the words of the interviewee.)

Where were you born?

Huntington, West Virginia, 1931. April the 27th. On eight avenue and 29th street. Near the old bridge, where the route 60 bridge is. There. Down under the bridge.

And you were raised there. What type of ethnic background did your Mom and Dad have? (Note from the interviewer - Mr. Zirkle's parents were - paternal, German and maternal half Native American.)

My mother was born on Big Paddy Creek, around eighteen hundred and something. She was raised up until she was thirteen or fourteen years old and that was when my father married her. Then they lived in Huntington all of my life. My father died when I was about three or four years old, me and my younger brother and he passed away shortly after that. He died with the disease, what they called, back in them days, the Hillbillies, called the bloody flux. We came to visit my grandma over on Big Paddy Creek and he ate too many grapes and that's what killed my baby brother.

And so your Mom raised you?

My Mom raised me until I was almost 19 years old and I decided I would join the military because I working for fifteen dollars a week, five and six days a week. I couldn't see where I was doing any better, bettering myself in any way doing that, at the job I was doing. The money wasn't enough to help support my Mother.

So you went into the service to make a better wage?

I went into the service because of patriotism and the Korean war. They was talking about was two weeks before the Korean war and the patriotism I wanted to do like the rest of my family did. They all went off to the war and they was all lucky enough to come back and they told me of their experiences and things and I decided I would like to be a soldier.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had eleven brothers and sisters. One sister that lived until a just few years back and they was five of us .. five brothers.

And they were all in the service?

Yes. All five brothers was in the service. That's what motivated me. You see, I said, well, if they went off to a war I would go off to a war too. I was just a little kid.

And so you went to the Korean war and you went over to Korea and as a ... in the military, did you have anybody call you a hillbilly or anything?

Well, as soon as they learned that you came from West Virginia, you were a Hillbilly, but they didn't really put you down for it, it was just a thing to joking and acting a fool about. Most of the people would run you down ... not run you down, but act a fool and kid with you, they were northern people. From New York, and Illinois, all up north. Even from Cleveland Ohio, people I was stationed with they laughed and joked about it. They respected us.

Why do you think they respected you?

Because we was outgoing. And you know, always, we made no trouble. We did what we was supposed to do. We never had no problems. I was stationed in a lot of different places where there was Hillbillies and we sort of stuck together. Worked together. You know we was stationed together. We always knew where each other was at.

So you helped each other out?

Oh yes. We did. Well, we not only - we helped - but in the military you helped everybody out. If you had any problems and they need you and you were there.

So you kinda took care of each other?

Yes that's right. The southern boys, the West Virginian boys, that I dealt with were always right there ready to get with it. Help you with anything that they can. If you had hard trouble making ends meet, with bills to pay, you could try to loan him some money or give him some money if you had it. They helped me and and I helped them out. Everywhere I went, we stuck together like that.

It was good to have that wasn't it.

When you were in Korea, you were sent over to Korea and you were real young, did a... were you treated, do you think, like all the other troops? Did you take a position of power or influence as soon as you went over there? Or what?

I was over there three months and I got put in charge of people right off. I don't know why, I was just a kid. I got promoted to staff sergeant before I left Korea. I stayed over there about fourteen and one half months and I was promoted to staff sergeant. In fact I didn't even know I had the stripes. In fact, I'd never had the stripes on. Most of the time I didn't wear any stripes because I didn't know I had them. All I knew that they gave me leadership things to do and I did it to the best of my ability. When I to on R and R from Korea to Japan, I was issued a uniform that had three stripes on it and I was a corporal and I didn't even know that. I didn't know I was a corporal.

And what did you think you still were?

I figured I was just somebody they got to take care of the people and doing my job - you know I did my job that way. I figured ... I never really realized until later on, a year or so later when I came back home, and the stuff that that I did as a leader. They always did ... I always ... The reason they did that ... they knew that we could assume the responsibility and carry on the orders that was put to us. When they told me something, I would take the people and do it. They would follow you for some reason. I don't why. It wasn't because we were hard on them or nothing. It was just that the togetherness thing. You worked together. To do what ever you had to do.

Do you think that was because you were a country person and you knew how to lead people, or ...

Well, we didn't really know how to lead people. We just did it. I had no idea why that they was always following you, they always thought you were doing the right thing because ... just because ... it just happened as far as I am concerned.

Do you have any interesting stories or anything like that that you'd like to share about Korea?

Just what impressed me the most in Korea was seeing all the death and destruction and stuff. It was awful hard to take for a country boy right out in that new stuff. I never really could adjust to it. I never could adjust to what was going on around me. The dead, the people, the Korean people that didn't have a thing to eat, they didn't have no place to stay. Their houses were burned up. Their cities were destroyed. The little towns ... I saw one ... one city, Wan Ju, Korea, I went in ... we went in through there and there wasn't nothing left, but some walls standing out in the open. The old bank had been blowed up. There were piles of people being stacked up and piled up like cord wood. That impressed me. That just overwhelmed me. As a young troop. It just overwhelmed me. I just wasn't prepared.

You weren't prepared. There's no way to be prepared see that type of thing.

No. That was the thing that impressed me that it just wasn't nothing to them. To get killed. They dug holes to put them in and used bull dozers to shovel people in. The Chinese when they come down, they were everywhere. You could see them. I saw people that their legs were blowed off. Our troops would treat them, just, the wounded Chinese, and North Koreans, they treated them just as well as they did us, as far as being hurt. They ... Whenever they treated them right. They bandaged them, they gave them shots, they gave them Novocain so the pain would decrease and they would take them, load them up and haul them off in ambulances and trucks and take them back to the hospital - our field hospital. () Seeing that really had an effect on me. That's why I'm being treated in a hospital, the veteran's hospital, at the mental hygiene clinic. That is what I think I am being treated for.

I read that that was one of the problems, is, a...when men came back, and that's a lot to see and you weren't raised with it and then it doesn't go away. It is real common to have the Post Traumatic stress, if you want to get fancy. A... It's a real common occurrence. There's men still writing and talking about it even today about Korea and Viet Nam and it's been years ago.

Yes. () I talked to these people when I was in service. I don't think, especially the veterans, that had been in Viet Nam, because they were more of them there with me, around me and we used to talk about things like that, and we'd remember. We would never get real serious about them. Everybody... at times we would () we would talk. We really didn't discuss stuff in there. That was what was wrong with me when I come out. I was... this was explained to me. I was always being around the people in the military is what controlled me while I was in there so I had the problems after I got out. I can't... I don't even like to talk about this thing right here on you tape. () I can't talk about this... I can't think about this.

Well, when you.... Let's talk about something then, a little less emotional. When you came back to Huntington, after the Korean war and you got out of the Army, you came back and tried to find a job? Every job I get, when I went to a job, nobody would... For some reason they wouldn't hire us right off then. We didn't have the assistance we have with the veteran's administration when we came back from Korea. We couldn't get no help of no kind. They would say go here to this guy to get you a job and go here and go there. Most of the guys that went in at the same time that I did, off the avenue where I lived, when I went in, I went in, a fellow from over on eighth avenue, I was walking down the road, and he said, "Where you going Calvin?" I said, "I'm going to down join the Army." He said, "I'll go with you." And we went down to the post office building in the basement and talked to him, and he said, "You come by here on Monday morning and send you off and get you a physical." They sent us to either Ashland or Charleston and we got a physical and we were off to Fort Knox Kentucky for our training. And after that, there was a steady stream of my close friends on eighth avenue that this was after the two weeks I was in there when the war started, they started drifting in. Out of probably, my closest friends, every one, every one of them went into the military. The last one that went in visited me over in Korea, and he, when he left, he came in, and when he left he went back to his outfit, he was in what they call the signal core, he had a jeep, and he happened to be passing my outfit and he saw the company number on a sign out front and he, when he went back, he got killed in a jeep. It was about, I guess it was a month before I left there. He come by to visit and when I come back here, he was shipped back in a casket and then I went to his funeral. () I went to his funeral. That bothered me a whole lot. () That's the only one that I really know that got killed. That went up to the big sky. You know what I mean. We wasn't the closest friends, but we were real good friends. There's a lot of things that happened to me that you don't talk about.

So you tried to find a job and nobody would help you.

Well, went to the social security office and I said, "I've got my two hundred dollars. I got mustered out with two hundred dollars, I got my two checks, and I been wanting to work and I can't find no job. What should I do? They said, "You go to these big factories." I went to them and filled applications out and nobody ever called. So I stayed out fourteen and one half months then I had my daughter on the way and my wife and I told my wife, I'm going to have to do something even if it's wrong. I'm going down to join the Army. I went back down to join the Army and I looked over and I seen these guys in this Air Force. Well, they had it made compared to what the Army did. So I talked to this recruiting sergeant and see what he had to say. So I went over to talk to the Air Force recruiting sergeant. I talked to him and he started saying (). Of course I had been out fourteen and one half months and I figured I'd have to take a reduction in rank and when I went in I took a reduction in rank and was sent to Wright Patterson Air Force Base. Well, I went to Wright Patterson Air Force Base and they kept me there for a clearance. Everybody was getting a clearance in them days because of McCarthy, I think it was McCarthy and communists and things. So they cleared me at interim secret and then I was cleared to secret and I was shipped to California. I was stationed at Norton Air Force Base. No, I went out there and I was shipped to Spokane Washington, a little base called, a SAC base, I stayed there for a year and then I was shipped to Norton. At Norton Air Force Base, I got my family there, I got my wife and my kid with me and that was the whole purpose of me going in the military. I wanted to have you with me. We was there about a year and then we got sent to Alaska. They wouldn't let you come up with your family at a lower rank, Non Com, Non commissioned officer. So after I got up there I got my family with me. The total time we spent in Alaska was six and one half years. We were together and enjoyed ourselves up there in that cold climate.

I remember that. It was a neat place to be. Were there a lot of West Virginian's up in, because I don't remember, up in Alaska with you?

Yes, especially after I was in the transportation squadron. At the shop I was at, there were probably six or eight, but in the whole unit, () there was probably fifteen or twenty people total in that one unit in transportation. They were all ... we all got together at times, one, two, three or four, or a bunch of us would get together and yack about the hills and things. We'd go to a airmen's club or the non commissioned officer's club and we'd set around and drink a beer or two and yack and talk about that, but a ... see like when we was getting ready to have celebration, party, Christmas party, or some kind of party, in our unit there was always someone that picked the music and we'd have ... we use to get a little band together and put a forty foot trailer inside our big shop, because it was a large shop and we would play music, country and western music that everyone would enjoy. Even the officers, they ... they were right in there with us in that room. They would come down set and have a party with us. See, about once a year we would have one around Christmas time.

So you felt like that music kind of together or something?

Well it was ... it was bringing ... it was getting the men together where everybody could be together and enjoy themselves. That was ... You have to have the companionship that the base would make a unit function properly. You just can't go around and be business like all the time. You got to have a little joke and laughing and kidding around or you can't get nowhere.

So you went to Viet Nam when?

I went to Viet Nam in February out there about the twelfth, fourteenth or fifteenth day of January. I was supposed to go on to school in Florida with the whole unit, but they a ... I told them I didn't need to go down there and get any basic training on a count of I spent my combat training in Korea. Fort Knox and Korea. The Cournel said, "That's right sergeant, says you just go on up there and go to that heavy equipment school up in Illinois where you should get your old lady and go home again and then you can report with the unit." So I reported to that base called at Tuoi Wa, Viet Nam. It was called Red Horse unit. It was probably what the answer to the Navy C Bs and the Army's combat engineer outfit. I stayed there about a week and they processed my records to Da Nang Air Base. At Da Nang Air Base they read my records and they automatically ordered me to go to Da Nang Air base the heavy equipment base. To run the heavy equipment ... At the time I had no idea ... I went up there to Da Nang and I walked into the shop and I was assigned shop foreman. When I was outside, I wasn't in the garage part, I wasn't in the office then and we had a sergeant that was pretty rough going. So when I got out there I run the shop foreman's job until he got ready to leave and when he got ready to leave, I was in formation out ... I held formation in the morning for the shop personnel and our motor pool I () I called the people to attention and opened the ranks up for inspection. The sergeant walked through and inspected the troops and went back out in front and I said, "Any further orders?" He said, "Yes." He said, "That's your position from now on you're now superintendent of vehicle maintenance." I said, "Hey, sarge, do I have the ability to do this?" He said, "You can handle everything. I've read your efficiency reports are outstanding, and you know more about it than nay other person in this unit." And I said, "Well, my heavy equipment training isn't as extensive as I would like it to be to take over the shop." He said, "You've handled everything out there since you got here. Three months you've run the floor out there. You are going to be superintendent of vehicle maintenance." I didn't say a thing. I said, "If you think I'm qualified to do it, I'll take it on." For the last ... For the main time I spent in Viet Nam, I run the 820th Civil Engineering, vehicle and heavy equipment section. While I was over there, our motor pool was a lot different than the Army. In Viet Nam in this outfit, because we had barbed wire, big fences, all around us and the Marine Corp stationed around where we were at so they could keep the Viet Kong and Vietnamese from getting in to us. They protected us. They really protected us. The only thing that really bothered me was rockets and mortars (). I had people ... We had to take care of the interior ourselves. The only place I didn't like to go around up there was that morgue because it stunk so bad, you know where they was processing the bodies and things. But I ... I did what I was supposed to do. I took care of my people. I lost no people over there. I had one person to a get their finger shot off. He was out in the field, operating and working on a ditch digger that they was digging trenches around so that the Army troops and the Marine troops they would dig ditches around trenches, so the troops could get in them in case we got attacked. The Viet Kong on the outside perimeter, they were out in the jungle. That's how he got his finger shot off. He come back in and he was, the dedicated type of person he was, he come back in with his finger in his pocket. He said, "I got my finger shot off." I said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, I stuck it in my pocket." ... He said to me, "Do you want me to wash off this ditch digger?" I said, "No. You go to jump in my jeep out there and I'll have one of my sergeants take you to the hospital." They took him to the hospital and they sewed his finger back on and saved that finger. That amazed me because I figured it was done gone. But he thanked me for the rest of the time he was there. He was always coming in thanking me about that.

Yeah. Because he thought he was supposed to stay there and do his job.

Yeah, he thought he was supposed to wash that up because I was kind of hard because I had ... I didn't have the people to wash the equipment up. I was undermanned. All, a .. the most of the men was at Tui Wa. We were the headquarters, but at Tui Wa, their was unit two, and they had all ... they had more people than we did. So I had to work with my people that repaired the equipment were mostly Vietnamese and there were three or four Vietnamese that were really good. I had one and made him the assistant shop foreman over the Vietnamese. And his name was Dan. He was a little bitty feller and I told him that any time he had any problems, he could come over here to this here office and you talk to me. I said, we'll straighten the problems out. We didn't have any problems, because I would go out once in a while, not very often and walk around in the shop and check things out. But when I first took over that shop foreman's job, I was set straight right off. We had a cournel in charge of the unit and I kept wanting to get out of that office and work. Instead of staying in my office and being the superintendent of that place. It wasn't sunk in my head that I couldn't get my hands in that grease and dirt and do some welding and painting and anything I wanted to do out there. He called me in. He took me in the office. He called me in the office and said, "Sergeant Zirkle, It's your job to stay in the office. You are running that place. It is too large for you to be out there messing around in the tool box." So I said, "Well, It's in my blood to do something, to keep my hands busy. That keeps my hands busy." He said, "You get in the office and keep yourself busy in there. You are running this outfit. You won't have time for that." Well, in about a month, I found out that he was right. So I just kept myself in the office and went ahead and did the job. I stayed in the office. I walked outside and I went around and checked that my people were all right. I'd get out of there four or five hours a day, as often as I could. I'd get out and walk around the units and things, because I had troupe and inspect a fenced in area where we kept our heavy equipment and stuff. I don't know, I just had this compelling urge to go up there and make sure there wasn't nobody coming through that fence to blow us up. The Viet Kong you know. One time I went up there and walked out there into the yard and I looked over there by the fence and it looked kinda odd so I walked over where the fence post was and this here little old Viet Kong had done tunneled out trying to get in around that fence post and had a tunnel right along the side of it. So, I told the people about it and they come up there and brought concrete and poured into it. So I didn't get to see where he dug out. He dug on out in the yard. He had already got out of that hole. We were setting up on an old ... Our unit was set up on a French dump. Where all the equipment was left there was shoved into that dump. When we got in there we shoved all that up and we piled it up. Every kind of piece of French equipment you could have was piled up in that thing. If we needed ... we got short on metal or something, for some of our equipment, we had to weld or put back together we went and cut off a little hunk of metal out of that scrap pile. Most of the time over there it was the hours that got us. We were working twelve hours a day and then I had a little light crew on at night to take care of the stuff that if you were out working anywhere you could take care of the equipment then. Of course I had a normal mechanics crew during the day time to take care of it, but most of the time they had to bring it back in at night because I didn't like the idea of going out there in the field, off the base working on the equipment. I had, we had low boys and we could go out and get it. Bull dozers and concrete mixers and things we'd just bring them back in. Our unit could lay a mile of runway in one day. Put down on the ground that much runway for airplanes to land on. The next day, they were landing on that special concrete.

So that was what your equipment was used for. Was to make like to make the runways and trenches and ...

Yeah to build buildings and stuff. We built a building, a mess hall on the opposite side of where we were in Da Nang proper and on the ground supply and all the other kind of units that was over there and they got it built and the second day they opened it up, the Viet Kong dropped a rocket right in the front yard and blew the whole front out of it, but we were real lucky that there wasn't nobody in there at the time.

So you had a lot of rockets coming in?

Oh rockets come in every night. We had ... I have a calendar that we ... in my hooch where we slept, that I kept a record, me and the people kept a record every time we got hit we wrote on the calendar hit one, hit two, in that one twenty four hour period. I still got the calendar rolled up and stuck away somewhere. I kept, that way, you could go through there and count how many attacks you got by rockets that were coming in all of the time. They had a mortar over there that if they could get close enough to the air abase that they could shoot that one big old, we called trashcan, shoot that one big mortar out at the end of the runway and put one big hole in that thing. But we would get sniper fire once in a while. A ... when I first got there ... Like I said when I first got there, they had, the French had telephone poles. They were made out of concrete. And I used to ... I had the big urge right after I got there to climb up that telephone and look out across the fence and look over there in the little village. So I started up that thing and I heard something go snap over top of my head and I jumped off of that thing. Somebody

was shooting at me so I never did go back up that pole. I decided that was a bad thing. I kept my feet kind of on the ground. But we did, we usually got about, at least, four or five rocket attacks at Da Nang Air Force Base, while I was there, every night. You'd at least get you one somewhere in the area. I was at the C B unit one night, I was coordinating some activities that we had, and trading parts so we could repair our equipment. The C Bs needed to repair their equipment, so we'd get them parts and they would get us parts. I was spending the night up there and they attacked that unit right there when I was there that night. The next morning I got up and went right back to the base right fast like. I didn't like that C B stuff.

Did you know a lot of other West Virginians or, you know, people from the Appalachian area over in Viet Nam? Oh yeah, I run into a sergeant in the Marine Corp that was stationed there at Da Nang and he was in the MPs and I think his name was Southerland, the best I can remember, but this has been a long time ago, it's been over thirty years and we got acquainted and he needed some plywood and I needed some other stuff. I traded him a little bit of plywood so he could build a room on the back of his hooch. So they could have a little bar or something in there. Where they could get together and yack, jack their jaws, act a fool and kid. Southerland was there and you had, down at Tui Wa, there was four or five, there was at least three that I remember, their names that was from West Virginia and when they closed down, they was getting ready to start rotating - moving out of Viet Nam, that they recalled that unit and all of them came up with me and I was to see that they worked until we got ready to leave. There was one from Logan, West Virginia, that knew the Zirkle's up in Logan, a lot of them. So I got quite acquainted with him and we talked about where my father come from and I said he come from an old hollow outside - well, my grandfather come from this hollow outside of Logan. We got to talking about it and he said, hear knew all the Lucas and all the kinfolk's we had up there. My dad had one sister up there and she had married a Lucas, and I was talking to him about that. We sat around and talked about it. He came around at night, I liked to do my paper work at night because I wouldn't be interrupted and I have a one-track mind. He'd come over and we would yack and talk and we'd talk about these things and come to find out, he might have been some kind of cousin to me because he was some kind of kin to the Lucas. This way we passed a lot of time away. So did you kind of like seek each other out?

Well, it seemed ... as soon as ... the hillbillies, as soon as they found out one was around, they were going to come and say, "Where was you born and raised at? Where are you from?" You know and we'd get together and talk and he was at Tui Wa and he was one of my people down there at Tui Wa and he as in charge of the tools. HE was in charge of what we called the tool crib. They issued the big heavy tools out and signed for them and they had to make sure they bring them back to the tool bin, you see, but it was a real experience for me. This business of being a big shot like a superintendent was great. You know I didn't have no problems other than once in a while you'd have one person that don't agree with you. You'd take them in the office and chase everybody out and discuss it.

So you got a Bronze Star when you were over in Viet Nam?

Well, I did. What I did, when I got back to the states, I was stationed at Plattsburgh, New York, there and I was in charge of - I was in contract maintenance, superintendent. But I was superintendent over one clerk and myself, you know. So that was the title they give me. So I was ... When I was up there, I visited the base commander because he needed a chair fixed. So I talked to, I got to meet the base Sergeant Major and the base Commander and I told the Sergeant Major that, I sure would like to look at that commander's chair and see what was wrong with it. So I went in there and the chair was pretty bad as far as I thought. That was my job, to get things repaired that they couldn't do on the base. That was why it was called contract maintenance. So I told him, I said, "Sir," I says, "We'll scrounge you up another chair and I'll get that one fixed for you." I had found a lot of paperwork laying around that that chair was messed up. But, I guess about - after I was there about a month, he called me on the phone and the base Sergeant Major said, "Go get in uniform and report to the base Commander's office immediately, if not sooner." And I said, "I'm on my way to get my clothes on." because I didn't wear my blues in the shop, because I was handling dirty, greasy stuff and I didn't want to ruin my blues. So I went home and put on my blues uniform and went back over and went to the Commander's office. There was about ten or twelve people lined up and they put me on the end of that thing and the base Commander, come out there and started out with the highest ranking person, the officers would come down and I was just about last there and he came down to me and come up to me and he pinned the bronze star on me for my accomplishments in Viet Nam. Our squadron Commander in Viet Nam recommended me that I get decorated and at the time the decision between two different medals, so I got the highest medal for some reason I guess I must have done the right thing while I was over there. That made me pretty proud for quite a while. When I retired out of the Air Force, I was decorated there when I got out. Where I done my job at the Air Base, that contract maintenance job. That was a whole job that I never

had any dealings with but I took to it like a duck to water. () It was two weeks and the Lieutenant, he said, (Bad spot in the tape) I was able to cipher out this stuff and (Tape Bad)

So you retired after how many years of service?

Twenty one years, six months and nine days in the service. I really wanted to stay longer, but home and the hills were calling to me. They were calling stronger to my wife and kid. She wanted to come back here, I really wanted to end my career because when I first got stationed up there, if you were exceptionally well qualified on your efficiency report, they had a tendency to want to send you back. They was getting orders ready, getting ready to cut orders to send me back to Viet Nam in six months. The was going to send me to Okinawa for six months and I was going to Viet Nam from there. I went down to see the base Commander and I said, frankly this is wrong. I had an agreement that I would stay. He said, "You shouldn't have to go back this soon for TDY or anything." I said you can look in my records and find it. He said, "I don't have to look at anything, you don't have to go back." So I went back to work. () I wasn't about to. When I came back ... The day that I cleared in on Plattsburg Air Force base, I went in and put in my retirement papers. We had discussed it and my wife and I decided we were going to do it. () The biggest disappointment I had when I got back here was not being able to go to work because I was too nervous. () I found out that I had a nervous problem and I was service connected for it. I was out there and the doctor sent me over to the Mental Hygiene Clinic and I saw a Psychiatrist over there and we talked and I have been going out there ever since then. I was told that what was wrong with me was that I had something like Post Traumatic - I asked the question do I have something like Post Traumatic Stress? So is there anything else that you want to say about the service? Do you feel like that you were treated like you were supposed to be? That you were appreciated for giving your twenty some years in the service or not?

When they gave me the commendation medal when I retired. I said that's a thank you. Before I left up at Plattsburgh Air Force Base, The Civilian that was in charge - He was what we called our buyer and he took care of everything that I had to process. In fact all things that were contracted off the base, he threw a party for me and everyone was trying to talk me into staying there. The sole reason I didn't stay another year or two, was because I knew good and well that they were going to send me back overseas and I didn't want to be away from my family. It was time I settled down and take my family back so we could enjoy it. Really ... I just got I had enough. That's why I retired. I loved serving my country. I loved doing what I was supposed to do. I felt like I was a part of the big machine that run my country. I really don't know how to express myself. I was totally involved, everywhere I went, working to the best of my ability. My efficiency reports, I still have some of them, and 1st says in there that I was exceptionally well qualified for every job that I did. I always did the best amount of time to accomplish the task that was set forth to do.

Do you think that that was something that is a characteristic of Appalachians? To do that little added bit? I never seen a West Virginian buddy that worked with me that didn't go the extra step to do a job well done. I was in charge of people, I worked directly with them, () they always took that extra step to get the job done. I want to thank you for letting me have the Honor of interviewing you and for giving me your knowledge and for serving our country like you did. I thank you Dad, Mr. Zirkle, for allowing us to do the interview. Thank you.

APPENDIX

Life History Form

Zirkle, Calvin J.
Male - Caucasian
Rt 2 Box 218
Proctorville, OH 45669

Date of birth: 4/27/31

Birthplace: Huntington, WV

Education: GED

Various training programs in the U.S. Army and Airforce including:

Mechanic

Heavy Equipment Mechanic

Supervisory Skills

Occupational Experience:

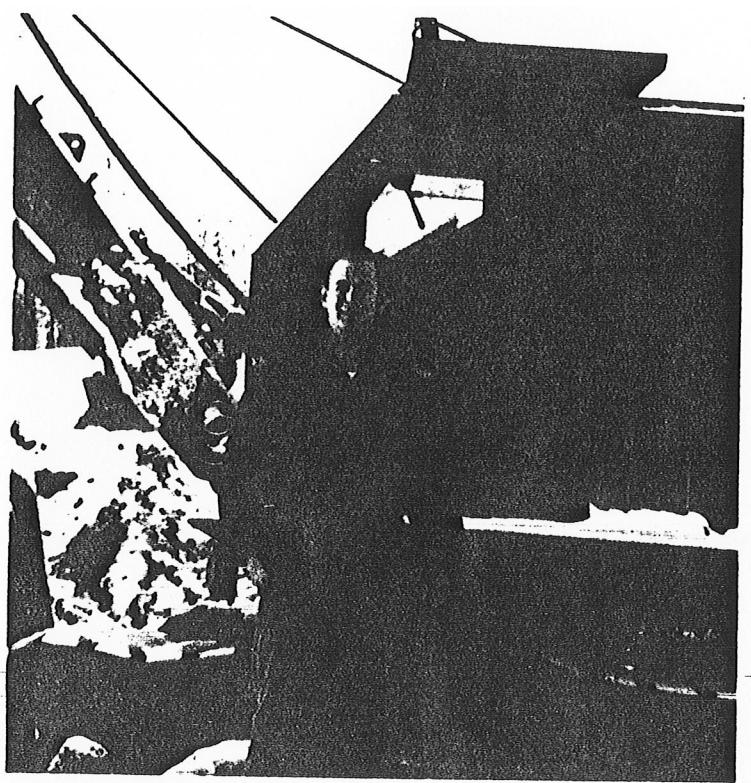
Korea War - U.S. Army

Vietnam War - U.S. Airforce - Red Horse Division

Retired U.S. Airforce 1971

Interview Questions

- 1. Where were you born and raised? What ethnic background are you?
- 2. Who raised you?
- 3. How many brothers and sisters did you have? How many of them were in the service?
- 4. When did you join the military? Why did you join the Army?
- 5. Did you encounter any stereotypes for being from Appalachia? i.e. being called a Hillbilly?
- 6. Did you know a lot of other West Virginian's in the service?
- 7. Do you think you were given extra responsibilities because you were from Appalachia and knew how to use a gun? - Read quote from article.
- 8. Any interesting stories about Korea?
- 9. What happened when you returned to WV after the Army?
- 10. Why did you join the Air Force?
- 11. Did you encounter stereotypes in the Air Force?
- 12. Did you know a lot of West Virginians/Appalachians in Viet Nam?
- 13. Do you think West Virginians were given point/dangerous jobs because of their Hillbilly backgrounds?
- 14. How many years did you spend in the service total? Why?
- 15. Are there any comments you would like to make about how you were treated/honored/not honored due to your military service?
- 16. Any pictures etc?
- 17. Any closing comments?
- Thank you for giving me the honor of interviewing you.
-



~~~~~



---

# **Don't Want Nuthin' Back**

---

## **"Don't Want Nuthin' Back"**

---

*By Michael "V-man" Viehman*

---

---

Many vets used a coping mechanism that entailed the dispensation of the gentle feelings. They were left with what was important for survival like rage, etc. If I wasn't angry, I was numb. There was no beauty in the world. This persisted after my return. Still does. Hell, at least I've got guilt and hopelessness for variety. I think things are finally starting to get a little better. Maybe.

---

copyright Apr 1994 all rights reserved  
revised copyright Oct 1994 all rights reserved  
Michael Viehman

---

Got It in Vietnam  
in place of the gentle emotions.  
It was Nuthin'  
an' I don't want Nuthin' back.

My father taught me to be strong  
in various ways.  
My mother taught me to feel for others  
and that feeling ran deep.  
Then I went to Vietnam  
and watched my brothers die.  
We lived in firebase Libby, Gladys, Nancy  
and in the bush.

I had to trade my feelings  
for my sanity.  
Never got my feelings back.  
Didn't keep my sanity.  
Got to keep rage, hate, anger, despair

and give up the gentle emotions.  
Now 24 years gone by,  
and writing it out  
has helped me to start to feel again.  
Ask Michele, my wife.

I'm afraid to go to the Wall.  
I don't want to go to the Wall.  
I am, above all, a coward.  
I'm not afraid of what it will stir up.  
Writing has already done that for me.  
I have enough to keep me busy.  
For now.

I'm not afraid of my shades  
as I know them already.  
I'm ashamed  
'cause I've about forgotten their names,  
and I don't want the names back.  
I've got their faces.  
Clearly.  
I've got their laughter.  
Clearly.  
I've got their cries an' moans.  
Clearly.  
And I can hear their silence.  
**CLEARLY!!!**

I'm just starting to feel again.  
I'm not afraid of the Wall because  
of the what it may bring back.  
I'm afraid of what it may drive away--  
the gentle feelings.  
I'm afraid the curtain will come down again  
and the kind emotions trying to return will be gone.  
I'm not afraid of what the Wall will make me feel.  
I'm afraid I'll feel Nuthin',  
and I don't want Nuthin' back.

Peace People,

---

# The Woods

---

## "THE WOODS"

*By Michael "V-man" Viehman*

---

copyright June 1994, all rights reserved

Michael Viehman

What is it about the woods? This time, they probably saved me. This time, The Rage was back strong. Rage at what? Shit. I don't know if I can pin it down. Useless, stupid deaths of brothers, for sure. It's always about that. What else? The lies we were told before we went and while we were there? Defending our Country. Don't give me that shit. I come from stock dedicated to defending the Nation. Remember Sgt. York? He was hill folk. Yes, we've always been stupid/patriotic enough to go when our Country called. In Vietnam, it didn't take too much time in country to realize that the Nation didn't need us to defend it there. It took even less time to realize that your brother was all you had. It was enough. I still cling to that. What else? How about goin' it alone when you got back? Millions of vets goin' it alone 'cause nobody wanted to/could hear. Who would believe what had happened over there? Not a subject for \_polite\_ society, doncha know. Well, kiss my impolite ass. This was gonna be about the woods and still will. I was tryin' to give background. I could go on forever about why/where The Rage comes from. You all know that.

Anyhoo, I went to the woods. This is always a good thing for me. Nothing can cure me, but it helps me change perspective enough. I sorta equate it with my broken neck. It's healed enough for me to \_usually\_ function, but it hurts all the time. Like my neck, some times are better than others for my PTSD. I can barely believe that I just wrote "my PTSD". I always consider that, not being a grunt, I got no right to be havin' any PTSD, and I will go to any lengths not to admit to it. Michele seems to think that I have a problem or two, though. I will rarely admit it - even when I kick through the front of an 8 foot glass display case. Please note that this is not characteristic behavior for me. After that, I wrote a story about the death of some friends in a bunker. Then I got a lot worse. \*Then\* I went to the woods.

The woods embraced me. I love them because they love me back. They are always the same. They are reminders of the simplicity of life - both good and bad. They remind me that I am nothing. Nothing more than any other animal that thinks it thinks.

**On the way in, I came upon an old grave - Confederate soldier. During the War Between the States, the path I was on was a line of march for the Confederates. They buried one of the vets here. What did the other vets go home to? I felt/feel a sense of brotherhood, too, with these long-dead men. Hopeless cause - bravely fought. Carpetbaggers sat out the war and then descended like vultures. Another analogy? RIP, brother.**

**I camped between a small cave and something wonderful. I have not explored far enough yet to see how big the cave really is. The other place I found is almost perfect. As far as I can figure, it must have been an old dynamite bunker from the turn of the century. The area had a small lead mining town a couple of miles away. Nothing left (and I do mean nothing) except a cemetery and a church with the name of the old town on them. The walls of the bunker are about 15 feet high on the back. They are made of blocks of native stone about one foot thick, 2-3 feet long and about 1 and 1/2 feet wide. The back is still standing. The front has fallen down into a jumble of blocks - it fell outward. If you climb over the blocks, you can sit inside with a thick stone wall to your back and be able to observe the only trail into the area. I've found that, with a rifle cradled across your knees, this is immensely relaxing.**

**When I first enter the woods, I am on edge. Something like an old friend/foe radar working. I usually am not so far gone as to think of the little (or big) animals as foes and, yet, there is an enemy there. I can feel it. It is me. \*I\* am what is out of place. I am very nervous without a weapon at these times. I have one. I need to gear down. Sit in the bunker. Thoughts roam. The roaming thoughts are comfortable now since there are no interruptions. Mind roams. Body guards. Think of another person coming down path - muscles in stomach tighten, forearms flex, palms feel 'funny' - feel weight of rifle on knees - tightness dissipates. Rifle tuned to take out a squirrel's eye at 50 yards - 10 shot, 1/4 inch groups (measured across widest part minus bullet diameter of .224 inch), at 50 yards, .22 LR, no shit - for light work - or heavy. I would never hurt anyone - unless they were a threat to me or mine. Sitting. Breathing becoming very regular. My thoughts are my mantra. Dragonfly comes by, and I follow its movements. Quick darts here and there. Quick. Efficient. A master hunter. Reminds me of others I once knew. I feel closer to them for seeing him. He hovers in front of me as if intrigued by this line of thought. As I raise my left hand slowly towards him, he darts to my face; and his wings brush my cheek. A light touch from wings surprisingly stiff. Then he lands - on my left hand - on the knuckle where the index finger attaches. I look at him - I guess he looks at me. He has multi-faceted eyes. If he is 'old friends,' he sees things from many more angles now. He sits for at least 5 minutes moving in a rotating walk, grips my knuckle tight, and is gone. Now I am much more pensive than perturbed. The woods and her denizens are beginning to uncoil that damn spring that had built up tension within me. I look around the bunker. When I had first walked up on it, it reminded me of the temples we found in**

---

## **Just When I Think I'm Better**

---

**"Just When I Think I'm Better"**

**By Michael "V-man" Viehman**

copyright December 1994, all rights reserved

Well....shit. I guess I've got a lot farther to go than I thought. I went to the Wall and fell apart there - in the dark of night. I think I may have some idea now as to why I've been puttin' off writing about that experience. I was hoping that particular bit of searing pain made me all better. It helped. It didn't make me all better though. Would that it were that simple.

Just when I've fooled myself into thinkin' I'm all better, someone (like Rosie) writes how a class is learning about the Vietnam War and Viet vets. These are young people (to me) who were not alive during the VN war. I think she said it went something like this: they divided up the class and made two groups - the ones who went and the ones who didn't. Does that division sound familiar to anyone else or just to me? I got no problem with that. I've been livin' that division for 24 years.

Then they put their chairs back to back and said the ones who went had been KIA, and they both had to write their thoughts. Well, I try not to turn my back on the ones who didn't go as my trust factor is not too high, although my paranoia is. Actually, I don't mean that statement to be as universal as it sounds.

She said they wrote furiously for a few minutes and then were told that the ten who died in VN were to go to the front of the room and stand in a line. No sweat so far.

They were to represent the Wall.

Damn, I clouded up; and I knew it was coming, but I read on anyway. As long as that damn Wall is just black stone, I feel no threat. I can keep emotion at bay. As soon as it takes on a human face...(and there are one hell of a lot more than 58,000 of them represented to me there.)

Ten people represent the Wall. The others who stayed home had to go and face them, and they read what they wrote to each other. The first tear of this 'all better' yet rolled down my cheek, and I knew I had been lying to myself about things again. I've got a lot more to say about that Wall and what it represents to me, but I intend to do that under a separate cover..

Suffice to say, it touches/moves me. I would not have been able to do this exercise that these people did. It's too close to the secret hurt in my soul. Oh, I talk about the hurt. You see the result - but I don't talk about it \*all\*. The fact that these young people are interested (read care) enough to try to understand moves me almost as deeply as my pains from the war itself. For so many years Vietnam vet was a dirty name to call somebody, and now they teach it in schools.

Just when I think I'm better, something so simple and pure of feeling as this reaches into my soul and reminds it of how far I have to go. I cried - again. Not sobbing stuff - just tears welling up and a few of the more adventurous ones making their escape down my cheek to remind me that, indeed, I am still a long haul from 'all better.'

I'm glad that this happened. I realize now what had happened in Washington, D.C., after I left the Wall that night, was that I had gone 'shields up.' That is \*not\* how you get better. Now I know why I had not written about goin' to the Wall. I had that stone-cold lock on my feelings in place.

Thank you, Rosie, for writing of that class. Please tell your sister that it touched a vvet far away. It will make it possible for me to continue my journey down the road back home. I WILL come home. I've been enroute for far too long. I'm bringin' as many of my brothers with me as I can.

Help your brother, brother.

Peace all,

V-man

---

\*\*\*\*\*

M. Viehman smmvielh@umslvina.umsl.edu

\*\*\*\*\*

---

 [Back](#)

the jungle. Moss was everywhere on these stones. Small animal burrows were in evidence here and there. There was rat shit atop the rock next to me. Home.

This was a day of winged things. A red-winged blackbird landed just out of arms reach on a rock. He twisted his head this way and that. He looked like the feathered embodiment of cockiness. Kind of like a fuck-you lizard with an attitude. Gave fleeting thought to blowin' him away. Decided it would be a sacrilege. Glad I didn't. I expected him to immediately fly away. He didn't. This bird was definitely concerned about me. After a minute or so, he opens his beak an' says "Sqrraaaawk!!." 'Bout scared the piss outta me after the long silence. I figured he wants to talk so I says "No shit?." Whereupon he just says "Sqrraaaawk" again and flies off. I have always liked red-winged blackbirds. I think they look like sergeants with that red- feathered insignia on their arms. But, even more than their plumage, I like/respect their attitude. Fly up to a dude with a gun and sqrraaaawk in his face for bein' there. I like that. Surprised he could fly with balls that size.

Looked down after the bird left and saw a partial skull. Played with it for a while. Looked like a fox face. It had been chewed up pretty badly by the little forest animals in search of minerals. Nothing goes to waste in the woods. Stuck it in my shirt to take home to Michele. I'm always gettin' her nice things.

A butterfly came by next and landed on my left knee. By now, I figure that they think I am just a rock or sumthin'. That little roll-up tongue tested around on me. After a while, its wings opened and closed with a regularity. Not bright orange. Sort of a tan-orange or brown-orange. I know that their life span is so very short. Crawl out of the cocoon, eat, mate, die. Is it really so much different for us?

I don't see where we are so different from the other animals. I know we like to think we are. I torture myself still with shit that happened over 24 years ago. I watch the guys on the 50th anniversary of D-day and see the same - an' that, as we know, was America's last "Good War." I stop at a Confederate soldier's grave and feel the same things in him. Respects still, sir. But really, we're born, we live, we fight, we mate, we die. Why is it so very much more complicated than that for us? Emotions, I suppose? I know that my torturer is myself. If I kill him, I die. I'll try to stick it out. I have so far. The woods help me to re-organize and remember that I am just another animal in Nature's kingdom. And, in the end, we become food for the worms just like any other animal in the woods. The butterfly will be killed by the dragonfly, the dragonfly will be killed by the blackbird. Some are prey, some are hunters, some are both. It's the natural order of things. In the end, just like in the woods, it doesn't matter. You live. You die. And I'm not out of the woods yet. Doan mean muthin'.

"His name is Kaiser now," said Harper. "Daddy changed it to that."

"That so?" Mack grinned. "Suits me. He's Kaiser."

"He likes sugar," said Harper. "And he likes to have his belly scraffed." "Dang, boy," chuckled Mack, "you make him sound like a puppy dog. I thought I had me a war horse." He smiled. "Any time you want to, Harper, you can come and see him." Mack pulled on his wool cap. "I got to be going."

Harper watched until the horses and sled vanished into the snow, then walked stiffly back to warm himself by the fire.

"I had to do it, son," Rose said softly.

"I know." Harper drew himself up tall and spat into the fire. "We can't be wasting feed on a horse that don't work. We ain't got money to keep a saddle horse."

"It won't be easy," said Rose, "but we'll make it through somehow, Harper."

"I got to go take care of the pigs," mumbled Harper. He pulled on his coat and stumbled to the barn. He sat on the wagon tongue for a long time, then started practicing what he'd tell them when he went back to school.

"My daddy," whispered Harper, "he whupped the Germans bad, killed over five hundred of 'em all by hisself. And my great-granddaddy, he rode with Mosby in Virginia and killed more Yankees than anybody. Daddy, he had this big old horse named Kaiser, meanest thing they ever was, wouldn't let nobody but me or Daddy close to him. Me and my daddy, we . . ." Harper blinked back tears. "Me and my daddy, we went everywhere together."

### The Sergeant

When others mustered out in '46, you soldiered on, commanding a squad that buried box after narrow box the Army sent home from abroad.

For a year the wind off the Kasserine, peasants muddled to their knees on Mindanao and oceans being oceans all over the world kept turning up dead West Virginians.

You brought all the known soldiers home, to Coal Fork, Seth, Clendinin, to the smudged daguerreotypes of company shacks that lay beyond slick rivers without bridges.

Your honor guard traveled the state that year making heroes. You and your men were heroes—the War ceremonially perfect—

in hills the newsreels never reached.

Sometimes twice a day you stiffened against the world's first standing order: assigning remains to the last slit trenches they would hold, awarding the widows flags they would bundle away under cedar or hang on the wall of the child conceived a month before Pearl Harbor.

### Don Johnson

Don Johnson, a professor of English at East Tennessee State University, graduated from the University of Hawaii (B.A., 1964; M.A., 1966), where he also worked for one year as an instructor. He brings an interesting perspective to writing about Appalachia in his poetry, which focuses on movements and individual personalities that take on symbolic or metaphorical importance when transformed into verse. Johnson is also the author of *Watauga Drawdown*, a collection of verse, and numerous scholarly articles on topics ranging from Joseph Addison to "Hawaii Five-O." He serves as editor of *Aethlon*, a journal of sports literature. His poem "The Sergeant" (from his first volume of poetry, *The Importance of Visible Scars*) examines the permanent marks that experiencing the barbarities of war leaves on the individual.

You were occupied with death

and mother ironed ten uniforms a week to keep you creased and properly rigid. Starch drifted like dry snow in parlor corners where I etched stick figures in the dust—

my own command.  
And I learned to fold the flags into tight blue parcels of stars, to execute the manual of arms with the snap of a garrison corporal.

But you never said  
"Death" or took me along to the hills.

Coming in to the warm laundry smells of your room,  
I'd find you silently polishing brass or trying to coax  
from your boots the last bright sheen the leather  
remembered. And I knew I would rise the next morning  
in darkness, roused by the small-bore crack  
of your clothes—your limbs forcing open shined khaki—  
to watch you go quietly off to your men.



One summer night you had the neighbors in the yard  
for home-made peach ice cream and army films  
projected on the flaking wall of the hen-house.

G.I.s bridged the Rhine at Remagen; Jap bodies  
spilled like sun-struck worms from a pill box,  
their faces scaled like snakes in the old wall's  
peeling paint.

And I wondered who buried them  
but lay in the sweet summer grass unafraid  
until the black-and-white war was done. Barrages  
stopped. Helmeted winners of medals marched home.  
Still the film reeled on, to Buchenwald, Dachau,  
where bulldozers shoved gray bones into pits  
without ritual, where the living were mute  
fluorescopic ghosts you called D.P.s, real stick people  
crushed into huts like our mildewed sheds.

Out of your sight, in the dark, I cried  
for them all, and for the man with a child  
thinner than any mountain stray. His face,  
framed in a single paint chip, leaned into the yard  
and, with the eyes like the half-blind bank mules'  
at the mines, he seemed to stare at the light  
from my bedroom window.

After the films  
had run out, while your friends were gathering plates  
or whispering good-night, I sat by your polished  
brown shoes, wanting to say,  
“The man . . .”

that he held that child in his coat-hanger arms  
then shoved him through the warp in the lapped boards  
covering our coop. That the boy was in there  
huddled in the dung and feathers, waiting.

But you never knew how he clung  
to those humid walls with the hens  
or how the flung door's slicing trapezoid of light  
cornered him in shadow.

You were occupied with death,  
while every day I trooped the darkened rows of nests,  
gathering the still-warm eggs with held breath.

### *James Agee*

**J**AMES Rufus Agee, poet, journalist, film critic, screen writer, and novelist, was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on November 7, 1909. A graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard University, Agee has earned recognition as one of the great writers of twentieth-century America. Agee's diversity of talent outweighs his relatively small volume of work; he adapted what critic Archibald MacLeish called his "poetic gift" to a wide variety of endeavors. He began with a volume of poetry, *Permit Me Voyage* (1934), but turned to journalism immediately thereafter, joining the staff of Fortune as a contributing editor and submitting freelance work to a variety of publications. His essay on Alabama sharecroppers, accompanied by photographs by Walker Evans, won wide praise when published in book form under the title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Agee was also a noted film critic and screen writer. As a novelist, he created *A Death in the Family*, which ironically was left unfinished at Agee's own death of a heart attack in 1955. The story of the emotional impact of untimely death on the immediate family won Agee a posthumous Pulitzer Prize.

Agee's Time essay on the development of the atomic bomb strikes close to home, literally, as Agee was born only a few miles from Oak Ridge, where research and assembly of the weapon helped to usher in the Atomic Age, opening a new chapter in the Appalachian heritage.

### **The Bomb**

**T**HE greatest and most terrible of wars ended, this week, in the echoes of an enormous event—an event so much more enormous that, relative to it, the war itself shrank to minor significance. The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude. More fearful responsibilities, more crucial liabilities rested on the victors even than on the vanquished.