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ORAL HISTORY

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DATE

Sept 8, 1984Jesse Womach
(Signature - Witness)EML 1
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MARSHALL UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: David Conley

CONDUCTED BY: Jesse Womack

DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 8, 1984

TRANSCRIPTIONIST/TYPIST: Gina Kehali Kates

SENT TO LIBRARY: May 8, 1997

Jesse: The date is September the 8th, 1984. Interviewee, Jesse Womack, to interview David Conley. Okay, David, tell me a little bit about your high school years.

David: I graduated, that's about it. I had a rough time getting through.

Jesse: Okay. When did you sign up for the Army? ('69) 1969. What were your impressions of boot camp and basic training at the time you went in the Army?

David: I thought it was going to be a lot smaller. I didn't think it was that big, bigger base. It surprised me.

Jesse: Did they tell you at the time that you were going to Vietnam?

David: No, not at that time, no. But I had a feeling I was going to go.

Jesse: When you first found out that you were going to Vietnam, what was your thoughts?

David: I wanted to go, at the time. (Why?) I just...wanted to do like my uncles, serve my country. I was hoping I got me a Purple Heart, but I didn't get one. All them got medals, stuff like that, you know. That was one reason I went, you know.

Jesse: What date did you first arrive in Vietnam?

David: It was about the 12th of January, 1969.

Jesse: How long were you there?

David: I spent two separate tours, almost two years altogether.

Jesse: Do you remember the dates from January to what?

David: January 12th to the first of December, the first tour. Then the second one was July 2nd of '71 until the 20th of February of '72.

Jesse: When you first arrived into Vietnam, what was your impressions of the countryside and the cities?

David: I never did make it to no city. It was these straw huts is all I saw.

Jesse: What did the countryside look like?

David: Just rugged terrain. It was a whole lot different from what it looks like around here, these mountains, you know. (A lot of jungle?) Yeah. Banana trees all around, coconut trees, stuff like that.

Jesse: What were the people in the country like?

David: I tell you...it's just hard to explain, you know, it's weird. They were just weird, seemed like. They was friendly. But you didn't know who to trust over there, who the enemy was. You'd walk by 'em in the day time and night time they could be dropping mortars on you. Just who to trust, you know.

Jesse: Did the military, the Army, tell you what your main objectives were during the war? What did they tell you that you were there to do?

David: I was there just to put in bridges, roads and stuff like that, help the country build itself. Fix their roads....

Jesse: Okay. You often hear the term in the press that America fought a 9 to 5 war, that they went out in the morning and came back in the evening to their bases. Do you feel the United States fought one like that?

David: In a way, yeah, I believe they did.

Jesse: Did the soldiers in general believe in their cause?

David: Some of 'em did, some of 'em, you know, didn't. I believed in it myself.

Jesse: What did they tell you...what did the soldiers tell you during the time? Did they ever talk about why they were there?

David: Well, a lot of [inaudible]...I volunteered. A lot of 'em didn't have no choice, you know. There was some that they give them a choice to go to prison or go to Vietnam, they took Vietnam, you know. There was a couple guys in my unit.

Jesse: Could you tell a difference between the people who volunteered and the people who were drafted?

David: No, I couldn't tell no difference. They didn't like being there, you know.

Jesse: Okay. Did...how many times did you ever see actual combat?

David: Well, twice pretty bad. I was on guard duty at the time, mortar attack. It didn't last but about two, three hours. [inaudible]....got in, opened fire on 'em. That kind of put a stop to 'em, you know. Every now and then, sniper round...pretty close to you. It wasn't just VC, you know, soldiers over there, they fought sometimes, if they didn't like you.

Jesse: [inaudible]...fire at the American soldiers?

David: They fired at us twice. Just harassment, fire around M-16's [inaudible].

Jesse: Were there a lot of booby traps, mines?

David: Yeah, there were mines everywhere. You had to watch what you picked up the next morning at the job sites. You could pick up a can or something and it would be booby trapped, you had to mine sweep, you know, every time you went out to work.

Jesse: Do you feel that the soldiers in your particular company had a lot of morale? (Yeah, I'd say they did) What company was this?

David: Engineers, 577. And I was the 544 Engineers the second time.

Jesse: Both times there was a lot of morale?

David: Yes, it was pretty rowdy, you know....

Jesse: You often hear in the press that the time you served, 1869 or 1969, 1970, there was a lot of racial friction between the blacks and white soldiers. Did you see any of this?

David: Yes, I saw a lot of it. That paddy cake and stuff, black power, fist signs. You could buy these canes over there with a fist on it, black power. [inaudible]...paddy cake and stuff, it'd kind of get on your nerves.

Jesse: Did they ever have...have any like violence between the soldiers?

David: Fights used to break out in them clubs, you know. It was mainly just [inaudible]...started a lot of fights over there.

Jesse: You see pictures in documentaries on television, it shows these soldiers going through on patrol, sometimes carrying music boxes and so forth. Did they do that?

David: Yes, quite a bit. When I was over there that's what it was, a lot of music.

Jesse: Even while you were on patrol?

David: I didn't go on patrol. I was with the engineers, you know.

Jesse: What part of Vietnam were you in?

David: You mean what the closest town was?

Jesse: Northern, Central, Mai Delta region?

David: Central highlands and second tour was the lowlands, too.

Jesse: The lowlands were at the southern tip, right? (Yes) What were the differences in the terrain?

David: Well, the highlands at night it got so cold you had to put on a field jacket. In the daytime you'd burn up. It'd get up to I guess about 110 degrees. It'd drop down to seem like 40 degrees at night. It got real cold. Like the desert here, hot during the daytime and cold at night. Lowlands it was just hot all the time. All hours. Day and night. You constantly burned up.

Jesse: Were a lot of soldiers going without helmets and jackets, because of the heat?

David: Well, we did when we was working. We took the flat jackets off, stuff like that, kind of got in the way. But we kept 'em near us in case we got hit, you know. [inaudible]...be real close, we'd put 'em on, kept covered.

Jesse: Why did you...why do you feel that the peasants do not fully support the South Vietnamese government?

David: What do you mean, the peasants?

Jesse: The farmers...out in the rice paddies. Why did many of them not support the South Vietnamese government?

David: That's something I don't know, I wouldn't know anything about that.

Jesse: Okay. How could you most often tell who was and who was not a VC, a Viet Cong?

David: You couldn't really tell. They all look alike. [inaudible]...our house girl, she was real friendly. And we caught her one day, she was up clipping the wires, [inaudible]..., turned out to be a VC, they found a mark on her. She was mapping out the area, you know, where they could drop them mortars certain places. [inaudible]...seven mortar all around his bunker, you know. They was smart, them people was smart.

Jesse: So you didn't know who to trust.

David: You didn't know who to trust.

Jesse: What did it do to you after a while? You didn't know who to trust. How did the American soldiers cope with this?

David: I don't know. Just drop 'em dead, you know. Women and kids, you know. The Viet Cong did put old women out in front of them, stuff like that, and got killed. And sometimes you didn't have a choice, fire right into 'em. It was either you life or theirs.

Jesse: Were there a lot of women and children into VC forces?

David: A lot of civilians helped the VC. They'd hide 'em, stuff like that.

Jesse: Did any peasants ever help you locate any VC? Like they would tell you there were VC up ahead?

David: No. Let's see, some boys would tell us when it would get pretty bad. But usually, nothing happened.

Jesse: Who was your commanding officer?

David: I forgot his name. I can't remember his name.

Jesse: What is the one thing that sticks in your mind most about the fire that you were in? The border attacks?

David: Well, if you were gonna live through it, you know. You'd think about home and everything, at the time, think about whether you were gonna make it back alive or not. One of them mortars slammed on you, that's all you wrote. There'd just be pieces of you.

Jesse: Was there quite a few casualties in your company?

David: Well, the engineers I was in, [inaudible]...in a way it helped them. We'd clear that jungle and them Viet Cong, they'd use it at night, that's what I heard.

Jesse: What is..what did you do to pass the time away when you weren't in combat or when you wasn't in a working situation?

David: Well, everybody in my unit just drank beer and stuff like that, you know. Listen to music...that was about it. That was the only entertainment we had over there. There weren't no TVs, nothing like that, you know. Just music and drink beer.

Jesse: In your opinion, how bad was the drug problem from the soldiers?

David: It was pretty bad, I'd say. That year I got over there it was real bad. There was a lot of 'em on drugs, heavy drugs, heroine. A couple of my friends, they mainlined about twice a day, heroine. They was in and out of the hospital over there. They'd be in the hospital for about 2 months and after they got out, it wasn't 12 hours they'd start shooting

again. A lot of 'em were hooked pretty bad.

Jesse: Was it as cheap as everyone says?

David: Yeah, the drugs over there, you go out in the village, like you buy a pack of cigarettes, you could buy a pack of marijuana, that's the way it was.

Jesse: How bad did the farmers or the Vietnamese people want the American dollar?

David: They wanted it pretty bad because you could buy more with the American dollar, than with their currency, about three times more, something like that. It was worth a lot over there, American money.

Jesse: How bad was the Black Market in the city?

David: It was pretty bad. They had RC rations and [inaudible]...beer and stuff like that, they'd sell it for like a dollar a can. And it cost us around a nickel a can. But it was pretty bad over there.

Jesse: In your opinion, how could the war have been fought and the outcome of the war might have been different?

David: I don't know if it could have been won or not. Just...you couldn't kill 'em fast enough, they kept replacing them. The soldiers [inaudible]...they were behind it. I don't know if it could have been done or not. Unless you dropped a big bomb on Hanoi or something like that, like back in World War II. I thought of that, you know, that might have put a stop to it. I don't think the United States wanted to do that again.

Jesse: You say you couldn't kill 'em fast enough. You mean...

David: They just kept coming across the border in the country and keep coming in, all the time. [inaudible]...was everywhere.

Jesse: Do you feel that Vietnam was a mistake?

David: Well, at that time I didn't, no. But today, the way things happened, it affects me, it ruined my life. Messed me up pretty bad. The Veterans hospital is for Vietnam Veterans...drinking, drugs and legs off, all messed up.

Jesse: Did you have quite a few friends that were killed there?

David: Just once. It was accidentally. By another friend. They were just goofing around, round went off and caught him in the chest. He bled to death before we could get him back

to the unit. Another guy a tree fell on him, a chain saw accident. That was about it.

Jesse: Did you ever, did you meet any of the Vietnamese people that you really liked, that you hated to leave or hated to see them go?

David: Yeah, there was a lot of 'em over there that they were real friendly, that I miss today. Just real friendly, a lot of people.

Jesse: Did they speak English?

David: They'd speak English real good. Surprised me. The Americans had been over there a long time, so, they just practically grew up around Americans, some of them young ones, young kids.

Jesse: How were you treated when you arrived back in to the United States?

David: We got treated dirty, I think, by demonstrators, wanting to work me over, stuff like that, fight me. (Why?) Everybody gave us dirty looks. (Why?) Just got them rumors going around that we were baby burners, stuff like that. Killed old women and kids, you know. I couldn't understand that myself. The demonstrators, how they done that.

Jesse: Do you feel the demonstrators help the communist win the war? By weakening the United States at home?

David: Yes, I'd say they did. That Jane Fonda went over there and got everybody all wound up. Everybody in my unit didn't like her. Every Vietnam vet I talked to, they hated her guts, you know. Had pictures of her on the anti-aircraft gun, you know? And we didn't like that. I think she had a lot of nerve to do something like that.

Jesse: How severe do you think Agent Orange was?

David: I think it was pretty severe myself.

Jesse: Did you ever have any contact with Agent Orange?

David: Yeah, I'd say I got in it. [inaudible]...and they sprayed that stuff. See, I got in it.... Every time we put up wiring, you know, we'd spray to kill them weeds. And I put that stuff up. I figure I got into it. It gets in the water supply, too. I'd say about everybody over there got into it. (Some how, right?) Yes.

Jesse: What do you think about the sudden surge of patriotism of Vietnam Veterans? For example, in movies and songs. The past several Veteran's Day has been....you know, towards Vietnam Veterans, since about 1979. You have any thoughts on that?

David: Well, not really. These movies they put out, these Vietnam movies, they wasn't really like that. A lot of stuff they put in these movies...it was a whole lot different. (How?) They make these movies up just so people would go see 'em, I guess. I saw one movie with a guy wearing a hand grenade, stuff like that, you don't see stuff like that over there.

Jesse: If you had to do it over, would you have still went?

David: Hell, if I had my health again, I believe I'd go back again, go back over there. (Why?) I just liked the, liked that land over there. It was hot, but it was beautiful country. Rice paddies just as far as you could see. It's a beautiful sight. And the mountains.

Jesse: How often do you think of Vietnam today?

David: I think about it about every day...myself. (In what way?) Well, because the [inaudible]...messed me up...ruined my life. I'm still going in and out of the hospital still yet today. The doctor wants to put me back in June, but I won't go back now. It hit me in the coal mines about 8 years, I couldn't drive...that medication they had me on and stuff. I finally got back to driving in '80. The doctors kicked me out of the mines. They shut down. I done all that because of Vietnam. It just ruined my life.

Jesse: Do you think, David, that the people who went to Canada during the war should have been pardoned?

David: My opinion, I say they should have been punished. Put in prison for awhile.

Jesse: How did you feel when South Vietnam fell to the communists in April of 1975?

David: I knew it was going to happen, before it even fell, you know. They wanted us out of there, when they signed that paper. That don't mean nothing to them, those communists, that didn't mean nothing. They was just going to build up all them borders, just like I figured they'd do and just hit all at once. [inaudible]...soldiers any how. They couldn't handle it.

Jesse: Why wasn't the a good fighting force?

David: I don't know. But they wasn't that very good soldiers; in my opinion they wasn't. (Why?) I wouldn't know....

Jesse: Did they seem reluctant to fight? Did they seem chicken?

David: I don't know. When took over, some of 'em seemed kind of chicken. I seen it on t.v. (When you were there, did things seem that way?) No. I didn't really seem 'em fight too much...actual battle. But I'd say they gave a good try. I think they tried to hold

their ground.

Jesse: Did the soldiers and the American soldiers belong?

David: Some of 'em did and some of 'em didn't. There was a lot of Americans getting in fights with them. They just didn't like 'em too good. They'd holler this, they'd holler, "Go home, yankee," and stuff like. "We don't need you here." But once they pulled us out, they wanted us back, it was too late then. They missed us then.

Jesse: How do you feel about the boat people coming over to the United States from Vietnam? The refugees?

David: Well, I'll tell you...they've been done better than I've been treated. Given jobs, stuff like that. I'm having a rough time getting work. The kind of work I get is just little old programs, about six months. Then after that's over, it's just a matter of time waiting, to get something else. Everything's so bad now.

Jesse: Do you think the boat people should not have been allowed to come to the United States?

David: Not that many, just a few maybe. I think they took too many of them, I'd say. I know one of them's a doctor at the Veteran's hospital, Vietnam Veterans they don't like them Vietnamese. (Why?) It just reminds them of the war, I guess. They just don't like 'em.

Jesse: What impression did you have when the government built a Vietnam Veteran memorial in Washington?

David: I was glad to see it happen. I figured it'd been too long. I think everybody kind of forgot us when we were over there. Wasn't no trades for us or nothing like this. Came home, these small groups, at a time. These demonstrators you know, spit on you, give you dirty looks, starting trouble. You couldn't wear your uniform without somebody wanting to start a fight, stuff like that. [inaudible] All we saw was a sign when we came back, it just said, "Welcome Home," that was it. And they processed us and we were on our way home. That was all it was.

David: How long did the process take?

Jesse: Probably about 12 hours.

Jesse: What was involved in the process?

David: Oh, just get [inaudible]...money to get home and get your uniforms, your papers

where you're gonna be stationed next. Pick your orders up, how days you were gonna be home on leave.

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Jesse: Okay, do you feel that the soldier image that was made when you first came over, is more positive now?

David: Yeah, they're treating us better now, I'd say. Like the World War II veterans, the Korean, they're treating us about the same. For awhile they wasn't, though.

Jesse: How long was it after you returned that they started treating Vietnam Veterans better?

David: About 8 years, I'd say. They blamed us for starting all these drug problems. World War II veterans, getting drugs started here in the United States. So I don't know if it's true or not. They blamed us for that.

Jesse: Okay, during the whole time that you were in Vietnam, you said you saw actual combat only twice, right? (Yes, twice) During the rest of the time, how did this...how did this feel? Was this a sense of nervousness constantly?

David: [inaudible]...get that fear, you know. After awhile you just take one day at a time. Kind of block it out of your mind. You always get that feeling you're gonna get shot between the eyes. As long as you stayed busy, it didn't bother you too much. That's the reason a lot of 'em got on drugs over there. To get rid of that fear.

Jesse: Did you have an interpreter with you all the time?

David: No, not in my unit, we didn't have no interpreter.

Jesse: How did you get your orders? Did they tell you each day what you'd be doing that particular day, or did they go by projects or what?

David: When you get over there, they assign you what kind of jobs, what you're gonna do.

Jesse: What did you have to do?

David: I worked on bridges, road building. I drove a truck for a while. Operator, just a little bit of everything. Just teamwork. (How many people was with you?) You'd go in groups, you know. There was about 15 each group. Different places on the road, putting in culverts, stuff like that.

Jesse: How far was each group apart from that?

David: About a mile, a half mile, all depends, you know...on what kind of work needs to be done.

Jesse: Did the farmers and peasants use the road while you were working on it?

David: Yeah, they used them all the time.

Jesse: Did they say anything to you as they went by?

David: No, just went on by, you know. They wouldn't wave or nothing like that.

Jesse: Just acted as if you weren't there?

David: No, they'd just drive right on through. They'd look at you, but they wouldn't wave. They'd just go right on by.

Jesse: What about the soldiers when they drove through? Did they stop and talk to you?

David: Yeah, everybody would holler, throw up their hands, speak to a friend. The South Vietnamese, I think they was mad at us. They'd be like a big load of sugar cane or something like that, and they'd jump up on the back of the truck, you know, get that cane and throw it off. They didn't like that. Couldn't blame 'em. Hell, we didn't care. I saw it all.

Jesse: How many Vietnamese women and boys did your company employ?

David: We had around 20, I'd say.

Jesse: What would they do?

David: They just...dig ditches, stuff like that. Just hard labor-type work.

Jesse: Did you carry any weapons with you while you were working?

David: Yeah, M-16's. We had to carry it at all times.

Jesse: Okay...are there any last impressions that you would like to share?

David: No, not really.... I sometimes I just wish I could go back over there. Do it all over again, see what happens. And it's too late now.

Jesse: What would you have changed?

David: Well, there isn't anything I could have changed, I don't reckon.

Jesse: If you could, what would you change?

David: No, I wouldn't change nothing. I figured it'd all been the same. They give me orders and I got to do it.

Jesse: Which...which tour do you think you enjoyed the best? The first one or the second one?

David: I liked the first one. The highlands, the mountains. It reminded me of home in a way. Nights were nice and cool. The lowlands you just burn up all the time. You couldn't rest at night.

Jesse: Did you ever see Bob Hope's Christmas show?

David: No, I never did make it there. A few guys in my unit made it there.

Jesse: Did you ever go on any relaxation weekends, like Tokyo or anywhere like that?

David: No, I never did take my R & R. I just let it pass on by.

Jesse: Did a lot of your fellow comrades take theirs?

David: Yeah, about several of them, I'd say.

Jesse: How does R & R work?

David: You just pick a city and they'll send you there for about 2 weeks. You've got to pay for it. You have civilian clothes. Now, that's one reason I didn't have no civies. I had asked for Sidney, Australia but I never did make it. I just let it slip by me. And if you was married, you could meet your wife in Hawaii, they'd fly you there. And if you wasn't, you could go some other place, Bangkok or Hong Kong, something like that. Most of them went to Australia. They just got tired of looking at slant eyes, I guess.

Jesse: Did you...did you get tired of the tour, near the end?

David: Well, in a way I hated to leave. I kind of got used to it over there. I was glad to get back home, too, you know. But I still miss a lot of things. (Such as?) I just liked the country, the way the terrain was and everything. And all them fruits. All the fruits over there. Stuff over there you won't find over here, you know. I don't know the names of 'em.

Jesse: You said a while ago that most of the Vietnamese you come in contact with were friendly. What did they...what did they do? What did they say to you when you'd like walk into a village or something like that, would they run up to you or would they just stand and smile...?

David: In the village it was different. I had a girlfriend who'd walk from the village. She had to walk way behind me on the other side of the road because of the VC in there. They'd see her, they'd see her. They'd murder her whole family. But uh...that [inaudible]...clown around, laugh, stuff like that. It's a whole lot different in the village.

Jesse: What was your girlfriend's name?

David: Her name was Hong, first name. I figure she's dead now. Everybody over there had anything to do with the Americans I figure they killed 'em.

Jesse: Do you think a lot of the Vietnamese were afraid to be friendly to the Americans?

David: Yeah, I'd say that.

Jesse: Because they never knew if they'd make it to the next day if they were seen with Americans, or seen talking to Americans?

David: They were afraid of them Viet Cong. They'd burn their house down or something like that.

Jesse: What villages were you near? Or what towns were you near?
Your first tour of duty?

David: First tour of duty I was around [inaudible]....
Cameron Bay, just...it was all over, just here and there.

Jesse: On the second tour of duty?

David: I mentioned some of them places already. I was about 12 miles from Saigon, never did make it there. I was there about 2 months there. I never did make it to Saigon. I always wanted to go there. Couldn't get no pass. Missed out on that.

Jesse: Which areas of the country had the most...most forces? Was it northern Vietnam or the southern part of Vietnam had the most concentration?

David: I'd say up north, around Denang.

Jesse: That's where most of the soldiers were?

David: Yeah, close to the border, yeah, I'd say the biggest part of them.

Jesse: Could you tell the difference between the Vietnamese people and the northern part of the country than in the southern part?

David: They was all the same, seemed like to me.

Jesse: David, the PBS Television Series, Vietnam: Television History...how accurate is that?

David: I'd say it's pretty accurate. I watched a little bit of it. It's pretty well accurate.

Jesse: Is there any part of the t.v. series that brings back memories?

David: Yeah, it brings back a lot of memories...definitely does.

Jesse: Do you ever see terrain on television that reminds you of a certain place?

David: No, Vietnam was a lot different place. Here in the states it's a whole lot different.

Jesse: On the t.v. series when you see pictures of....(yeah)...it reminds you of the country? (Yeah) Do you ever look at that country and say "I must have been there?"

David: Yeah, I know I was there. I get flashbacks of stuff like that.

Jesse: Do you ever dream about it at night?

David: I have nightmares all the time from over there. I just can't get it out of my mind. I'd say it took six years of my life, that country. It took my health. I'm having a rough time today trying to get myself together. In and out of the hospital...it doesn't seem to do any good. If I just had a steady job. That's what I mainly need right now.

Jesse: What do you think...what do you think would have been different? How could the, how could the war have been different for you? The outcome...in relation to your health?

David: I think the [inaudible]...joined the service that I'd be doing a whole lot better now. I'd probably be working right now, have a place of my own, stuff like that. And over there, it just messed me up. I got that disease, hepatitis. It almost killed me. That has a lot to do with my nerves. My nerves is too...it's got me on dope. And that's messed my life up. It's some rough times. I just can't seem to stay out of the hospital.

Jesse: Do you ever talk to any Vietnam veterans that have the same problems?

David: The Veteran's Hospital is full of them. They've got just about the same problems. They can't seem to adjust today. Some of 'em came back and are doing all right. Some of 'em didn't. Didn't make it, didn't adjust. I look at these mountains and sometimes it seems like I'm back over there, the woods, you know. You don't never get over it. I spent to terms and I feel I've went back a third time, too, and four. I just kind of liked it over thee. I spent five and half months in Germany at [inaudible]...big city. I don't go for cities. So went back over there. I felt more comfortable...mountains, you know, the jungle. That's where I liked it. I was hoping I'd get me a Purple Heart, like my uncles, but I didn't get one. Another reason I went back. You can get a scratch and get a metal, whereas if you lose a leg, it's a chance you take.

Jesse: Do you think there were too many metals given out over there to people who didn't deserve them?

David: No, I figure they earned their metals, I earned mine. I got an accommodation metal. I'd like to have had a few more, but I didn't get it.

Jesse: One question I forgot to ask you. When you were working in the Engineer Corps did you ever have any South Vietnamese working with you there?

David: Yes, they worked with us, too, helped out. (What were they like?) Just real friendly people. We had some South Koreans, too. We...they was working along with us. We ere training them...run bulldozers, guide trucks, stuff like that....helping the Vietnamese. When came back in '72 training them, so they could take over.... See, we helped them. It didn't do any good.

Jesse: You were training the Vietnamese in '72. Did you have a hunch that they wouldn't be able to hold their country?

David: I...well, myself [inaudible]..little old country. They was outnumbered. They just couldn't handle it. They tried. [inaudible] Saigon...you could see the fear in them. I guess, them Viet Cong, when they got 'em they probably tortured them to death. Before they killed them. Because they were mean.

Jesse: Could you tell a difference in the Vietnamese people in 1969 and 1972?

David: No, I couldn't tell no difference.

Jesse: What about the soldiers? (The American soldiers?) Mmm-hmm.

David: The only thing I know they were using more drugs, the American soldiers did. In

the later part of years. I guess a lot of 'em were just bored to death. They just stayed high. They'd go out in the fields sometimes not to meet the enemy. They just had one big party, it seemed like. Them Viet Cong, they'd usually hit you like on a Sunday afternoon. We'd had a big beer party, a bunch of us, they know what you're doing. They're watching you all the time. Everybody knew you had hangovers. Boy, they hit you then. They was smart. They wasn't afraid to die, neither. They was doped up, those Viet Cong. They'd just come right up, you'd keep firing right at 'em.

Jesse: They were brave?

David: Yeah, because they were doped up. They didn't fear death.

Jesse: Do you think that the Vietnam War was too televised? You hear a lot about...the thing on t.v., when they first televised the war, coming on every night on the news. Did you see cameras constantly?

David: Just one time over there...filmed us. We were working on a bridge. That's about the only time.

Jesse: You said the Vietnamese knew where you were at all times. Did they more or less choose the time to fight you?

David: Found out about 2 o'clock in the morning, right around in there. They didn't bother you too much in the day time. They was mainly night fighters. Out during the day them copters were hunting for 'em. And night time you had to get covered. Only the thing at night, [inaudible]...mortar, at night. Other than that, you wouldn't be able to find 'em, unless you just hunt 'em down. They lived under the ground during the day. It was a pretty tricky thing.

Jesse: Was there a lot of searches, then, by copter?

David: Yes, helicopters, 24 hours, constantly. Like bees, buzzing all the time around. Them copters helped us a lot, and the Air Force.

Jesse: What time of day did you see...

David: I didn't believe in that Napalm they used. They...it was just too bad to use on people.

Jesse: Did you ever see Napalm being used?

David: No, I never did see it. But I know what it'll do to you. It burns you. It's an awful way to go like that, with that stuff on you. Burns you up bad.

Jesse: David, when you were working on the roads, building the bridges, if there was a...did you ever see like a battle maybe, all the refugees would be coming down through the road, anything like that?

David: Yeah, you could see battles all the time, air attacks in the distance. We'd stop working and watch the Air Force hit a certain ridge. It was something to see...after the smoke cleared. There was a logging camp went in, took all the trees out. Wasn't much left. I don't see how any enemy could survive something like that. But some of 'em did, though.

Jesse: They kept coming back, right?

David: Yeah, I was gonna cross that border, Ho Chi Minh Trail. ...try to stop their supply lines and just...the [inaudible]....fix the road back. You couldn't stop 'em.

Jesse: How often did you see the Air Force bomb in a distance?

David: Oh, about three times.

Jesse: Was there ever a crowd of refugees come down the road where you were working?

David: No, this time I saw...[inaudible]...wasn't near no village or nothing. We was down at that mountain pass working. [inaudible]...huts up on the hill.

Jesse: How big was the average Vietnamese village, the area? How many people did they have?

David: They had pretty good sized families. Little old straw huts, you know. In a way it was like going back in time...pioneer days. They're so far behind. They had to gather up firewood to cook by. They eat on the floor. Just mud packed. They didn't have no concrete floors, stuff like that. They didn't have no commodes, stuff like that, just went out in the weeds. Just like going back in time when we were there. And you were away from the cities over there, that's what it was like. The guys in my unit, they used to joke about you wouldn't believe what I've done today. You'd say, "Well, what did you do?" "Well, I sat on a commode." [inaudible]...luxury like that over there.

Jesse: Did the Vietnamese people ever ask you like what was life like in America?

David: I know one thing. All of them wanted to get over here, I know that. That's all they talked about, trying to get to the USA.

Jesse: What'd they say?

David: They'd just ask a lot of questions. You'd show 'em pictures of snow and their face would light up. They'd never seen snow. I think that's the main thing they wanted to see was winter time.

Jesse: What about the luxuries? Did they ever ask you about the luxuries?

David: I'd always tell 'em how colorful it was, all colors. Over there it was all green everywhere. Tell 'em about cars...how big the cities were. They was wanting to see it. They thought, they thought everybody in the United States was rich, too. They thought everybody was rich. And I said, "That's not true, though." They think all of us Americans are rich.

Jesse: To them what's rich?

David: A lot of money, I'd say. Have a lot of money, cars, nice homes.

Jesse: A while ago you mentioned...you mentioned your girlfriend. How long did you see her? (About three months) Did she ask you like what was America like, or... something like that?

David: Yes, that's all she ever talked about....

END OF SIDE 2 - TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE 1 - TAPE 2

Jesse: Tape 2, David Conley, Vietnam interview, September the 8th, 1984, interviewer Jesse Womack. David, how...how did your girlfriend talk about Vietnam when she talked?

David: Uh, she talked about how big the country was, how much she'd like to go there. She'd seen pictures, how beautiful it was.

Jesse: Did you show her pictures of southern West Virginia?

David: Yes, I showed her a few pictures. She liked it.

Jesse: What about the Vietnamese that worked for your unit? The house girls and the house boys? Did they talk about America, too?

David: Yes, about every one of them Vietnamese, every one of them. That's all they ever talked about. That country had been at war so long, they just wanted to get over here, I guess, with freedom.

Jesse: Did they adapt to the war easy? Being in war most of their lives, did they adapt pretty well to the war?

David: Yeah, I'd say they did. I say a lot of 'em, they were friends with us and friends with the Viet Cong, too. They wouldn't tell you.

Jesse: [inaudible]

David: I'd say some of your own sons were Viet Cong, and some of 'em worked with us. It's just the way it was over there. They'd just pick their sides, you know. A lot of 'em for the North.

Jesse: Could you tell any differences between...did the men treat the Americans better than the women, or did the women treat the Americans better than the men? In general?

David: Well, there were women over there that liked to take advantage of the Americans, get all the money they could. All the prostitutes. (Even in the country?) Even in my union, some of them papisons, they'd bring their own daughters. And wanted us to use 'em, just to make money. Place was flipped out.

Jesse: How often did that happen?

David: All the time. Place, all it was...whores every where, and boysons, selling drugs, little old kids, six, seven years old, selling drugs to guys.

Jesse: What would they say? How would they talk...?

David: Well, they'd just walk up to you and ask you if you wanted that's uh...in...in Vietnamese that means marijuana. You'd say, let's see what you got there, what else. They'd have a little bit of everything. Smokes, cocaine, heroine, them little green vials of stuff. All the GI's took advantage of them drugs, too, because it was cheap over there.

Jesse: What would they say? How much would they say it would cost? Did they tell you? Or did you deal back and forth until you reached...?

David: Well, I never did buy. Some of my friends did. So I wouldn't know how to answer that questions. [phone ringing in background]

Jesse: Did every Vietnamese girl have this dream that you, as a soldier, or the American soldier, might take them home? With them or did they just want to make money as being prostitutes?

David: No, a lot of 'em, they was wanting to get married to Americans, come back to the states and lived. And I told a lot of 'em, when you get back to the states you might not like it, because they might not accept you. That's what I told 'em. There was a lot of Vietnam veterans, they wouldn't hesitate today to shoot a Vietnamese. They really hate 'em.

Jesse: Women or children, right?

David: Yes. A lot of 'em just want to forget about that place. They don't want to mention the word "Vietnam". They just want to block it out, put it behind 'em.

Jesse: What about the difference in age? Did the younger people treat you different than the older people?

David: Yeah, the younger people did. (How?) They seemed to be more friendly. (As the older people?) Yeah. (Why do you think that was the case?) I wouldn't know why. But the younger people were friendly, a whole lot friendlier.

Jesse: Maybe because you were closer to their age or.....

David: Yeah, I'd say that.

Jesse: Did you...did you ever hear of news of what was going on back in the United States, in relation to war protest or anything like that, while you were in Vietnam?

David: I never did hear no news over there. There at Kent State, where them four got shot, I didn't even hear anything about that. I didn't keep up with the news. I didn't know anything about that until I got home.

Jesse: What about the...what about the news in Vietnam, period? Did you ever hear any news like what was going on up north, or down south, or in the different parts?

David: The only time [inaudible]...in February? Ho Chi Minh's death anniversary, when things were supposed to get real bad around that time. That year I was over there, in '70, went through all that, but wasn't much happened. Like the other years.

Jesse: Your second tour of duty was in 1971. (Yeah, '71 to '72, a couple of months) Could you tell it was winding down, then, for the Americans?

David: Yeah, I got back over there and it had changed a lot. A lot of Americans coming back, units pulling out. You just about had the Vietnamese ready to take over.

Jesse: When the Americans were pulling out, were they happy? Were they sad or what was their, what was most American reactions for their units for going home?

David: They was glad to leave, a lot of 'em.

Jesse: What did you expect...what did you expect when you came back?

David: I didn't expect no parade. I knew they wouldn't do nothing like that. I expected to be treated more friendlier. But everybody just gave you dirty looks and everything. Get in them airports, ready to go home and nobody'd walk up to you and say, "You done a good job over there." Nothing like that...they just ignored you. It was a whole lot different from them other wars.

Jesse: Do you think there's a change now toward Vietnam veterans?

David: Yes, they're starting to get a little more respect, I'd say.

Jesse: Do you think that will continue?

David: Yes, I'd say it will. Probably get better.

Jesse: For now, what do you think the United States should do about the Missing in Action people still in Vietnam?

David: [pause] Well, they're going about it the best they can, I'd say. There ain't much you can do. Them Congress, they lied. There's a lot more over there. I figure some of them over there lied. They probably made slaves out of 'em. I say some of 'em's lied.

Jesse: What type of food did the Vietnamese people eat that we don't have in the United States?

David: They eat a lot of fruits. I don't even know the names of them. You don't see it here in the states like that. Just rice and little fish, a few vegetables. [inaudible]...chopsticks. A vegetable, piece of fish. They eat different than we do. They didn't have food like we did, like hot dogs and hamburgers.

Jesse: Did you ever have hot dogs and hamburgers while you were there?

David: Down in the cafeteria, you know, down at the base.

Jesse: But now out in the field?

David: No, not in the field. We had sea rations.

Jesse: What about Coca-Cola?

David: Yeah, there's Coca-Cola over there.

Jesse: Out in the field, or just at the base?

David: Well, you could take some out in the field, a few pops.

Jesse: Was there any method for keeping it cold?

David: No. You usually just drank it hot. Beer was the same way. You couldn't keep ice long over there.

Jesse: Well, David, thank you for your time. This concludes the interview, unless you have anything further you'd like to add?

David: I'd just like to add one more thing. I'm on medication, my nerves...it makes me forget, stuff like that, slurs my speech. That's about it.

END OF INTERVIEW