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WEST VIRGINIA VIETNAM VETERANS

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Ernestine Thornton

CONDUCTED BY: John C. Hennen, Jr.

DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 7, 1986

TRANSCRIBED BY: Yvonne Tomblin

TYPED BY: Gina Kehali Kates

John: This is John Hennen; I'm with Ernestine Thornton in the office of the Veterans Outreach ...Vietnam Veterans Outreach Center in Charleston. The date is Friday, February 7, 1986. Uh, if Ernestine will say a few words, we'll get another check on the recorder here.

Ernestine: Alright, Joe uh, we were talking about uh, the uh, National Board. We had one uh, army nurse, former army nurse on there last term who stepped down and we promptly re-elected another.

John: Uh, Ernestine recently attended, I guess it was in uh, late November uh, National Convention of the VVA uh, where Robert Mueller was re-elected President. Uh, why don't you tell us some more what went on there; what kind of uh, election struggles developed during the four days you were there.

Ernestine: Well uh, there were all sorts of inviting going on. Everybody seemed to have a campaign of one kind of another uh, not only for uh, national office but for types of legislation that they felt would be uh, beneficial changes to the constitution uh, positions that VVA should or should not take. And those were...were a major source of controversy. There has been a lot of criticism from what I guess we have to term the more right wing uh, fashion of VVA about uh, particularly Bobby Mueller's and the National Board's uh, stand in the past on international issues. And that became a real issue at this convention that I mean it was getting real hot about uh, you know, you're not speaking for all of us when you do certain things so maybe you shouldn't be speaking at all to uh, certain kinds of issues and I think that's the way it was finally resolved. Uh, by uh, resolution that uh, for a period of time VVA National would not uh, speak to international uh, problems such as POW, MIA uh, issues and that sort of thing; they would refer all that to the national League of families.

John: Now, is this something that had been building up for quite some time?

Ernestine: Yeah, over a two year period; since uh, the last convention - the family convention in uh, it would have been '84, I guess. No, I'm sorry, uh, '83's. (talking at same time-inaudible)

John: And that was held in Washington?

Ernestine: Right, uh-huh.

John: Uh, one veteran told me, one veteran who is active in the VVA uh, told me that he'd heard reports or had evidence that uh, there was some funding coming fromfrom uh, outside sources to set up new chapters. He specifically mentioned the midwest I think, as sort of a counterbalance to ...to for want of a better expression, I'll say the Mueller ideology. Is...is there anything to that?

Ernestine: Uh, let me put it this way. Part of the lobbying for me as a state council chairman I was a little bit surprised uh, at the energy that people put into lobbying me for my votes. You would have thought that I was taking thirty votes instead of the five from West Virginia (uh-huh). Uh, and one of the things that I was outright offered was I was told that money was available to my State Council and to the chapters in West Virginia to use as we see fit, foundation kind of money you know, grants, uh, no strings attached kind of money. If we could see our way clear to vote on that issue (uh-huh). I re...I just rejected that idea out of hand and released uh, delegates from West Virginia to vote their conscience on the resolution. We ourselves could not reach a consensus (uh-huh), and so I felt the best thing to do was to release them to vote their own conscience. I don't think anybody was unduly influenced by this idea of uh, some outside money or something coming in. (uh-huh)

John: Is the uh, is this the sign of uh, maturity or uh, a sign that the organization is getting a broader base uh, or is it ...is it an indication just in the advancing age of uh, vietnam veterans. That the organization needs to turn itself more towards strictly veteran's advocacy and not taking a stand on international affairs. Or is it uh, is is something that we'll go ahead....

Ernestine: I think it's probably a combination of all three of those things uh, I think we've seen nationally, a kind of a grass roots movements among veterans to be more concerned, particularly Vietnam veterans, whether they are in VVA or not, from what I read uh, to be concerned about veteran's issues-to be concerned about each other. Uh, I think it's a sign of maturity and of acceptance of ourselves within the organization and acceptance of the American people that has been brought about by the publicity uh, the welcome home, the two salutes , the national memorial and the unveiling of the statute. All those things have been very positive and...and firmed up the positive image of vietnam veterans and it may be that we just think more of ourselves now (uh-huh), uh, in that we don't have to address every single issue (uh-huh), and allow them uh, a way to get attention drawn to us. That we are learning to work within the system because the system is recognizing us. And I think this is a real positive position to be in. It is a good thing for us. It is a sign of maturity, I think, on our part.

John: Now, one thing that (clears throat)....Mr. Mueller told me was that vietnam veterans as a rule are not uh, joiners. Uh, I dont know if he meant that to be a reflection of the suspicion of authority or structure or whatever it was. Now, how does that...would you comment on that, and if it's true, how does that reflect uh, say in this area and in your own organization?

Ernestine: That West Virginia Vietnam Veterans are not joiners. That's probably real true uh, for a variety of reasons, our mountaineer heritage being one of them. You know uh, our...our cultural background. That the most important things are the

family and one's neighborhood or the hollow where you were born or where you're living or whatever your neighbors. But not a great deal of allegiance you know, to uh, state-wide kind of organizations. Uh, it's obvious that West Virginians are not big joiners of veteran's organizations, there are more than 27,000 Vietnam veterans here, VFW, DAV, and VVA can't account for more than 3 or 4,000 of those. Uh... (you mean as members?) ...as members, right. Uh, I think more and more uh, more of the fellows who know about VVA are uh, becoming more prone to join. I think uh, maybe that men do not get interested in ...in veterans organizations or civic organizations until they reach a certain age of maturity and establishment if you will, within the community. There is a certain status that goes along with that (uh-huh). Uh, then too, a good many men who came back from Vietnam went to service organizations and I don't intend this to ...to be a real severe criticism of VA, VFW or DAV, but in the sixties, late sixties, and up to the mid-seventies, when they went to the local veteran's organizations, VFW, DAV and the others, they weren't well-received, you know, I mean they got some static. Well, it wasn't a declared war uh, there weren't any major battles fought, and that turned a lot of guys off. (uh-huh) And they just, you know, they could care less. Some of them have come around; some have not.

John: Is the VWF, for instance, currently uh, actively trying to recruit Vietnam era veterans?

Ernestine: I would say they probably are, for this reason. The average age of the WWII veteran, which is uh, the biggest body of veterans that make up the VFW uh, are in their sixties and they're beginning to lose members through uh, natural death rates. And for that reason, and well with advancing age of course, too, members are not as active and uh, so they are...they need to recruit the younger people. Uh, that's the Vietnam veteran whose average age is around 35 and they're gonna need not only the participation but the funds (uh-huh).

John: I knw when uh, I saw a newspaper article from a couple of years ago that that was after I believe, the first delegation that the VVA went back to vietnam uh, where the..the national commander of the VFW labeled Mueller and his group communist sympathizers (uh-huh). Uh, he caught considerable amount of flack for that but is...is there...is there any kind of tension there? is that...is that sort of accusation sort of abated or is there any of that left over?

Ernestine: It's abated uh, matter of fact the new commander was uh, let me think now, if I can get the man's name, for heaven's sake! I met him uh, (pause), I want to say Billy Williams, but that's not correct. I'll think of it...Bill Ray Cameron is a Vietnam veteran himself. (is he the national commander?) He's the national commander (uh-huh), or at least has been over this period of time. They may just have recently elected somebody else. But he made a ...made a consereted effort to reach out to Vietnam veterans and uh, of course, his point of view is we're all

veterans. You belong with the VFW, the whole organization should join (laughing)...(uh-huh), but he himself joined VVA. And that was a big point for us, that he's willing to do that. (oh, he is a member of both organizations?) Yeah, he is, he is a member of both organizations. (okay)

John: Now, did the VVA charter ever...was the national charter...did it ever get all the way through the Congress?

Ernestine: No, it's still hung up. I talked to uh...

John: And it's been there for a couple of years now.

Ernestine: Yeah, I well, it died one year, just died of natural death on the floor before it could get to voting. Jeremiah Denton uh, spoke against it in the Senate last year it killed it.

John: On ...on what grounds?

Ernestine: On the grounds that uh, Jeremiah Denton being a POW himself, and all that implies, seven or eight years in prison camp, spoke against the bill on the grounds that Bobby Mueller and other members of the VVA had made a trip to Hanoi, had been wined and dined by the uh, uh, communist government of Vietnam. And I think you can see his point, being a former POW, it was probably just more than he could swallow. (uh-huh) But Denton's status in the Senate is such that there are an awful lot of senators there who are...who were of service age during the Vietnam war, who did not serve. And I don't think, my personal opinion is they just didn't have the guts to vote this thing down (uh-huh), to override them. It'll go ...it's gone back, Mary uh, Stout told me day before yesterday that it's you know, will be coming up for consideration some time soon. And they expect a big battle again.

John: Now uh, how did ... how did the national defendants' trip to Hanoi on that...on that first trip...I know they caught a lot of flack and they felt like they were misunderstood. Now, I'm not really clear on what grounds they...

Ernestine: Well uh, on a personal level first of all, when a veteran has a right to go back look at the number of WWII veterans who have gone back to visit Germany and France and Italy and uh, my own brother-in-law just at the time that was going on the criticism of Bobby, my brother-in-law was going back, you know, for the trip to Europe uh, to see Normandy and all those countries his uh, members of his old outfit and the general who commanded it were going back. Bobby's point was that number one, we have the right to do this, we're veterans. There are some issues that we need to speak to such as POW, MIA's, uh, Amorasanian children, uh, what's happening in...inside Vietnam as far as uh, whether or not the U.S. is imposing any type of economic sanctions through allies or whatever against them. Uh, that we have a right to know those things and that there's nothing dishonorable about doing it and certainly when one goes to...to a host country, you take the food and the drink, and you know uh, you also, the ...the thing that he

was really criticized for was laying a wreath at Ho Chi Minh's tomb (uh-huh). Uh, I hear a lot of this, both ways. Veterans say you know, yeah, yeah, the guy should be shot, you know; I hear other veterans say, what can you do if that's the protocol? You know, this trip is set up, you can hardly refuse it (uh-huh). So uh, it's my feeling that if the protocol was laid on, I'd been hard to cut the back out of making the gesture. And that's what it was- just a gesture.

John: Does the VVA have uh, delegations now or is that part of their...their move to sort of withdraw a little bit from the state....(both speaking at once-inaudible)...

Ernestine: I think the uh, I think the trips will still be planned, (uh-huh), because there...there's good information coming out of those. Uh, you know, we got information on remains and actually had the remains shipped back uh, now that's opened up a wholewhole new thing. Uh, the Vietnamese have suddenly become more than willing to cooperate and allow people to you know, go out and invest...investigate crash sites and...and to interview people who may have been witnesses to...to a death or know where somebody's buried or whatever. Uh, I think that a lot of that has come out of VVA. I really believe that. Uh, a lot of it of course, has been Reagan's willingness to support this thing. And his uh, his feeling with his remarks at the uh, at the tomb of the Vietnam unknown soldier, (uh-huh), when he was entombed, he or she uh, that we will not close any chapters you know, and that entire attitude. Uh, I think the trips will probably continue because they are important to Vietnam veterans. If I could afford it, I probably would take one, too. (Yeah, it's pretty expensive). If I could afford the money and the time. It's around \$3000 and it would be uh, probably two weeks, (uh-huh), 10-12 days. (uh-huh) And that's just out of my reach at this point; that kind of money unless somebody's willing to foot it for me and I would have to be looking very closely at somebody who was willing to do that. You know, and so....(pause)...

John: You know, you...it was June of last year, you were inducted as the...as the President of the State Council. (right) West Virginia State Council of the VVA. (uh-huh) And you are the first woman president (right, uh-huh), of a, now of the State Council, or the Chapter or...or any VVA body, huh?

Ernestine: Of any, well, of any State Council (uh-huh), in the United States and I understand that that's true of any service organization at the state level in the United States. They've never had a woman commander, state commander of the VFW in ...in any...any state and neither whatever DAV tells their person at the state level has never been a woman (uh-huh).

John: Uh, how's it going so far? What ...what's the agenda for uh, the State Council?

Ernestine: Well, it's varied. Uh, we have a lot of things going on. Some we'll see all the way to completion, and some I mean,

well, they're two or three years down the road. They'll just begin with me and the Council as it is now and if they happen, they'll happen two or three years down the road. Uh, we have a Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the works. The Governor appointed a Vietnam Veterans' Commission around the first of January and that body hasn't met yet, as far as I know. They're scheduled to meet some time in the next few days. Uh, that came out of Chapter 38 VVA (that's the Charleston...), right, but it was endorsed by State Council, and we let them carry the ball with it because they wanted to, (uh-huh), and they felt they had the clout to go for it and did, and did a real fine job. So, I think, uh, that met some opposition from other veterans' organizations in the state, strangely enough. Uh, they wanted an all veterans memorial, an all wars memorial, starting from Spanish American War all the way through Vietnam. Uh, we went back to the government on that. And uh, he agreed to continue the backing if we didn't want to step out of the way and let them deal with this all wars memorial, then he would take the heat and go on and have it built (uh-huh). So that's where that is. Uh, other things that we have in the works. The uh, department of uh, Business Affairs for the State of West Virginia has been accredited. Uh, by VVA legal service. That's been up for two years because of uh, the State Council's position two years ago that uh, Department of Veterans' Affairs was in poor shape, there was nobody qualified, and now had to handle VVA legal business. Uh, to make a long story short, they accredited the system as it stands and it falls to the State Council to appoint a chief representative down there. Now uh, we haven't been able to uh, agree on who we want, so I scheduled a meeting with Colonial Lune for the 21st of this month (uh-huh), to outline uh, what our needs are, our requirements, and see if they're some place that we can meet you know, have a meeting on that and agree. Uh, have personally instituted negotiations with a man from max-media and a singer for what was originally intended to be uh, Vietnam Veterans album uh, a man named David Morris is a Vietnam veteran, has made it as an artist in _____ at a college in North Carolina, he's from West Virginia and he wanted to do this Vietnam veterans album using poetry and music and uh, songs written for and by Vietnam veterans. We've expanded the idea uh, along bill Brennen, is the owner of max-media downtown. He and I have uh, taken it a little bit further and decided to go for a movie. And he just sent me the written proposal and the budget. We're talkin' \$107,000 (uh-huh), uh, on this thing, and we need to find the financial backing to see he says it's there and he has some sources that he can tap for that so uh, that's gonna be quite a project. It will cover five-six months from actual time of shooting will be that.

John: And this will focus on state veterans - West Virginia Veterans or....

Ernestine: Uh, West Virginia veterans, right. Using the central characters, David Morris, the singer. (huh)

John: Uh, well, let's...since you mentioned the movie, that's one thing I wanted ask you about uh, as the veterans, as Vietnam

veterans are more and more distanced in time from uh, from their experience in the war, uh, does that effect their perceptions? Uh, what they remember? Uh, how they feel, either politically or personally, about uh, the experience?

Ernestine: Well, I'm sure it probably effects them to some degree, but I find veterans are just as hotheaded about the stand that they took you know, in the sixties is probably the same stand they're takin' today. It may be modified just a little; they may be willing to listen to a little more of uh, what the other side had to say, but most guys won't. I read a recent study by the Veteran's Administration, that there was something to the effect that 80% of the men who were in combat situations, actual uh, combat infantry type people, felt that they had not been allowed to win the war. And that 50-60% of those would go back if they were given a chance. And that's an amazing figure, I think. (slight chuckle) But I think it's pretty, pretty accurate reflection.

John: Was that a surprise to you?

Ernestine: Yeah, it was, uh-huh. To...to know that it was that high. I hear that kind of stuff from....from veterans an awful lot, particularly around here, this is the vet center and this is where they talk about things when they're sittin' out front having coffee or whatever. You know, they talk to each other about it and I hear that sentiment a lot. Well, if we had a chance you know, we could have done this. And I think uh, history bears them out. That they weren't permitted to really put up a decent uh, decent show.

John: It's, I know uh, Bob Mueller said a similar thing that when he came out of service and his particular experience in the VA hospitals, which of course you're familiar with too, (uh-huh), uh, he thought that he overrated the...the anti-war sentiment, sentiment among Vietnam veterans. Would you, at that time 1970-71, uh, could you comment on that?

Ernestine: that he overrated? Well, I...that could be very well true, talking from 1968 when anti-war protesters uh, almost stormed the national convention, the national democrat convention, and were put back by national guards and then uh, police in ride helmets and you know, the whole scene, that very bad whole scene. Uh, that's when I became aware of the intensity of the anti-war demonstration. Uh, it seemed that everywhere that I turned I was confronted with this. I was on recruiting duty in Cincinnati from 1969-71, and there were protesters everywhere. The marines had to come out of their office and surround my car and take me into my office on day because I was being pelted with rotten eggs and uh, vegetables, rotten vegetables, and stuff. So, I was impressed. I was most certainly impressed. There were places I ...that was advised not to wear my uniform and not to uh, uh, drive a government car. One of those was Ohio State University. And I had students in the program, nursing programs, out there uh, I don't know how they were coping. I say they probably weren't

identifying themselves as uh, army scholarship students. But when I needed to see them, a routine counseling or uh, anything of that nature, I went in civilian clothes and took my own car. (uh-huh) So, (clears throat)...I was impressed with that. Whether or not we ever raided it, it's hard to say. You never hear anything else out of the media; they were always covered. I mean, (is that for you? a phone ringing), no he'll get it. Uh, so it was hard not touh, to rate that. I can give you another instance. I think the lowest point that I had was uh, about 1972 at Walter Reed. The job I had there was head nurse of Orthopedics, with all Vietnam veterans, who were either amputees or just badly wounded somehow or other. They were qualified to be orthopedic cases and this was a real strenuous job. It was a full-time thing for me uh, 12 hours a day many days and I'd take a briefcase full of work home. and there were a couple of Washington tattlelords who just sort of specialized in givin' rotten Vietnam stories. About GI's fragging their officers, and GI's running and GI's going, sent off troggle, and 200 yards down the road and sitting down on their butts. You know. And not even bothering to uh, put up a show of uh, a show of uh, patrolling. That was the lowest point for me, it was....it was like hitting below the belt. I had fifty guys laying out there without arms and legs, but somehow now that I had seen some combat, that's obvious, but yet, the papers were playin' up all this shit about how bad moral was, how bad the drug problem was, how poor our soldiers were performing. To me that was the lowest point that I had (uh-huh). (pause)

John: Uh, I wanted to ask you about uh, the image, the current popular image that's being portrayed of the war itself and the...and the veteran and I might as well say the Ramobism or whatever (uh-huh), expression you want to use. What is your personal reaction to that and what...what kind of feedback do you get from the veterans that you counsel and that you're associated with in the VVA and otherwise? (uh-huh)

Ernestine: Uh, most vets that I know in VVA who have seen it think it's ridiculous uh. The movie "Rambo" I saw uh, I thought was ridiculous. I mean, it was like watching superman do a Vietnam veteran, you know. The things that he did in that movie are obviously ridiculous that's....uh, I think a couple things. Number one, I think that this uh, this image of the Vietnam veterans and...and this positive upswing and this macho image is part of...is part of the nationalism, this nationalist movement that we're seeing in the United States. And that we're all heroes. And we so desperately needed to be heroes, John. After the Vietnam War in those lost years, we so desperately needed some heroes. The fact that they are exaggerated may be just the other side of the pendulum. We swung all the way to the what shits we were uh, what a poor generation of soldiers. Uh, what...how terrible our performance was in Vietnam. We came out of that badly scarred, all of us, just from being; you can't be called names forever. (uh-huh) You know without feeling it and carrying some of that with you. So, I think it's just the swinging of the pendulum in the other direction. (uh-huh)

John: How about the marketing of that image. Uh, I know that the VVA (that's just pure commercialism), I know the VVA in New York had some action against Rambo dolls. (yeah) Well, it pisses me off that they're allowed to do that. The man was a draft dodger during the Vietnam war. He set out of a lot of his time into Switzerland. Uh, been told that he got a medical, I've read this and and uh, that he got a medical deferment and that was on some type of allergy to mosquito bites. Well, he most definitely would have had problems in Nam. I've also been told that he has asthma, but he doesn't appear to be asthmatic. So, I think they guy's just you know, he's just ripped off whole concept of Vietnam veterans.

John: As far as you know, has he made any uh, this is a little off the track of the historical perspective, but has he made any uh, uh, financial considerations to... (as far as I know he hasn't)...VVA or other Vietnam veterans?

Ernestine: As a matter of fact, I'd love to ask him. I'd love to just write a letter and say you know, you owe us. (coughing)

John: You said a while ago, this is sort of lines up with this what you mentioned about the nationalist movement, nationalistic movement, too, that 50-60% of veterans had indicated that they would go back if...if (uh-huh), under different conditions. I'm gonna flip the tape so we won't lose it. You implied that uh, a lot of veterans, more than you might have suspected, would uh, indicated that they would be willing to go back under different conditions. Uh, do they ever make any reference to their uh, the next generation? Would they uh, are they concerned that their children, for instance, might be asked to...to go fight another kind of action. Oh, I'm sure they're really concerned about it. Every parent, that's certainly uh, Vietnam veterans. I'm....I'm very concerned about it in my own family with uh, little boys coming up. My....my nephews. And I'll go so far as to say it ...it better be a different kind of war. Or if not, I've got the money and the gas to get 'em out of the country. (uh-huh) I don't think I could go through that with my own family again. There were uh, four members of my family altogether in the service during the Vietnam era. Three of us went to Vietnam and I asked that the nephew be kept in the states. And I did that formally and you know, it was all above board and all the rest based on the fact the three of us had come back. And uh, the chances that had he gone with the infantry, uh, uh, they were just real high that he wouldn't come back, unscathed at least. I...as I say, I'm concerned about the children in my family. I don't, the girls I'm concerned about, too, because uh, in...in another prolonged war right now uh, we have women pilots, women helicopter pilots, uh, maintenance officers, all that sort of stuff. I read in uh, Newsweek a while back, I was really surprised at how close to the jobs that lead into combat that women are working, those MOS's. Matter of fact, I understand the President's been real concerned. But uh, I don't know what I would tell these kids coming up. Take a good hard look at the political situation. We were the generation that got bit, bit hard, hurt badly. And I don't think

that memorials and welcome homes and salutes and all that stuff is ever gonna be enough. Guys who were emotionally scarred so badly from the war and fifteen years of not being able to get a job, not having treatment for the PTSD problems, those fifteen years are lost to them and the future ain't very bright. So, there is a large proportion of Vietnam veterans who suffer from PTSD who may or may not have received treatment, who will never be a whole lot better. And I'm sure if you've been around the vet centers, you've been able to identify with some of those people. (uh-huh) So for me, you know, it ain't enough. All that ain't enough. Uh, what male Vietnam veterans tell their sons? I've heard some of them. Varies all the way from uh, yeah, if it's necessary, you know, you'll go. But not if it's bullshit. I heard that one from a veteran's counselor not long ago. If it ain't bullshit, you know, I'd let him go. Well, how did he know without investigating the thing. Is there a from your own perception, is there a greater awareness of the political situation that could lead us into another confrontation now or are we just about on a parallel with the awareness of the Vietnam era? Among the general public.

Ernestine: Among the general public? Yeah, we're probably about on the same...about on the same parallel. I don't think the people pay that much attention to what's happening. And they're probably aware of...of El Salvadore and Nicaruaga because there's been a lot of publicity about it. And people demonstrating and people calling attention to it, but I'd say probably my own family uh, there isn't any more political awareness about that than there was about Vietnam.

John: You mentioned a while ago uh, the heritage of Appalachian soldier, uh, I guess and you ...you implied not...not so much uh, a desire to be a part of a bureaucratic (uh-huh), structure or anything like that. How about traditional appalachian uh, attitudes towards authority or towards straight-out patriotism. Uh, were those undermined during the Vietnam era among the soldiers (oh, yeah), appalachian soldiers, and how does that affect the vets today? (phone ringing)

Ernestine: Well, I think, number one, there's always been that mountaineer suspicion, appalachian suspicion of people in authority. Uh, but it was worse after the Vietnam war, the situation within the military was extremely poor. I think among the listed men who are being drafted primarily in the '70's, uh, 69, 70, 71, uh, or the men who were volunteering or poor, either black or white, poor, uneducated, and I had personal experience with this working with soldiers who could not hardly sign their names to get the medical board to get them out of the army. Uh, and coming home to the kind of treatment that they received and the uh, the fact that they were totally being totally ignored by the Veterans Administration and did nothing, nothing at all to attempt to meet their needs. You know, the ...the big bureaucracy just didn't do anything at all to help them. Uh, I think the condition just worsened from there. They had the distrust of the government, distrust of the military, and that carried right on over to their distrust of the Veterans Administration.

John: And is it still carrying over?

Ernestine: To some extent, yes. I think the vet center programs has made a big difference in that, but you know in the beginning the vet center programs did all these things to appear not to be associated with the VA. You know, they located out in the community, the guys in blue jeans and a shirt, uh, 80% of them are Vietnam veterans themselves, so you know these...these things were deliberate. And that has worked to a large extent but I still see it here. You know people are real suspicious of the federal government.

John: Now that image of...of being disassociated from...from the veterans administration, that's changing, too uh, is it not? Uh...(I think it is)...is that a conscious thing or just a matter of financial realities or both, (I think financial realities, uh, I think maybe if we see the vet center uh, program survive, we'll probably see it within the VA hospital or clinic you know, just as a matter of savin' money. Savin' the big dollars. Uh, as far as personnel, we'll, they're answerable to the VA you know, that's where they draw their salary. It's understandable that their gonna lean to obeying the rules and regulations and that always comes down heavy with vets as being you know, federal authority so...

John: Oh, shoot, I had a question, but it slipped away from me. Oh, does uh, how is the...how is the organization uh, looking at the uh, the uh, implications of the Graham Rudman uh, legislation. Are you apprehensive at all?

Ernestine: I am uh, I am sure everybody on the State Council is apprehensive about it. We understand it's gonna cause cutbacks; we've already heard rumors from the VA hospital. This is the big thing that...that it will effect hospital care, and who it will effect. Now uh, I personally think that there are categories of people being treated by the VA who probably never qualified for it for VA treatment. But the fact that Bobby Mueller comes down hard on this I understand, uh, somebody who has emphysema uh, was never in combat, but who has a medical problem with emphysema and is receiving 100% of his treatment through the VA hospital is questionable. But it's been done as a matter of expediency and courtesy and whatever, because the funds were there. And those people are gonna be cut off; I'm sure of that. Uh, it's gonna be real hard to get a service connected disability because if you aren't already being treated for something down there, it's gonna be a ton of paperwork and problems and aggravation to get an appointment to go in there to be evaluated. I mean, it's going to be a lot of problems. You're going to have to see your family doctor, he's going to have to write letters, you're gonna have to get the Councils to write letters, you know, on down the line. It's gonna be hard for somebody uh, to be evaluated even. Services will be cut back uh, so far as the kinds of service available at the hospital; I really feel that way. They're gonna have to kind of consolidate their resources. I understand they've uh, I don't know whether they've had any cutbacks buy they can't

get any increases right now. Dr. uh, Karen was asking for twenty positions at the hospital and asking VVA to write some letters for those. (that's in Huntington) Yeah. They've asked me to back them up on it. Uh, I don't know whether we can get those or not. I frankly have my doubts. If you get them early; get them now, you know, we might be able to. A year down the line, I doubt it. I doubt it for sure. Yeah, I'm real apprehensive about it. I think they may start cutting veterans' pensions and things of that nature.

John: The State Council, from what I can tell, actually it was just ...it's only been formed about four or five years. (yeah, something like that) Uh, it's made up it seems to be made up of real core of activists. (uh-huh) All from the area; all from the West Virginia area. What makes certain veterans get so involved in veterans' affairs and certain ones; well, we've already discussed why some people don't get involved. What made you get involved in the VVA?

Ernestine: Uh, a couple of things. In a sense, it was my ...getting in a position to be able to reflect on my Vietnam experience, my whole military experience in the years since. And as a natural consequence of that wanting to be with or active with people who shared that experience. And while I had it to some degree at the vet center, the vet center being federal government, I wasn't able to do active things, political things, or uh, accomplish things. Make things happen or make them change by working through the vet center. I would have to do that through a veterans' organization. So for me it was just a natural consequence of having sit down and taking about a year to look at and reflect on the Vietnam years. And to some extent I'm still doing that, I guess it's a constant evaluation of it. Uh, I ask myself sometimes why. I went for many years, from 1973 to about 1982 and never knew another Vietnam veteran with the exception of one army nurse that I knew in Lexington and we shared uh, quarters for a while, both working at the University of Kentucky. Uh, after I came back to West Virginia, I worked for two years without knowing any other Vietnam veterans-male or female. And I was always kind of yearning to know; like to talk this over with just one other person. But I lived in Huntington for awhile and I was told there was a vet center there. But I didn't know what in the world it did and I just worked. I worked and went home. Uh, so it just came about as a result of finally opening up my own head about it. And feeling the need then to be a part of...of this. I think...I think of it as a movement, an activist movement, veterans' issues to kind of address some of the wrongs that I felt were done to us. But uh, the years when I didn't share with anybody what it was like to be a nurse in Vietnam or to be a nurse in the army, taking care of wounded Vietnam veterans, which I did for so many years. Uh, I'm sure somewhere down the line, I'll lighten up; I won't want to be as completely uh, involved in it as I have been. I keep saying that's gonna be next year (laughing), but it will take me a little longer than that to get some of this stuff off the fire that I've started, you know. (uh-huh) Gotten goin', I want to see that completed. Why don't other vets? Maybe

they don't wanna look at things as intensely as I have; and I have one a real intense job at it. Maybe they don't want to do that. Maybe it hurts too bad. It hurts and maybe it hurts them too bad. Maybe they don't have the time, jobs, uh, family responsibilities, that sort of thing, making a livin', it too heavy a trip for them to give much free time to this. But I feel like each...that each year that we go on, we make a little more uh, open to them. We are a little more visible and it's a little more acceptable and so you know they'll feel welcome to just walk in one day and join or not join; they'll at least...you know...know where we are.

John: Now, about this time a year ago, maybe a little bit later than this, you couldn't pick up a newspaper without a couple of stories about the...the ten year anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the national sort of a cartharsis or whatever it was, (uh-huh), in recognition of Vietnam veterans. Now you or whatever it was, (uh-huh), in recognition of Vietnam veterans. Now you don't see very much in the paper about Vietnam veterans (uh-huh), uh, is that disturbing to you or do you think that's just a natural thing that's not going to sell papers now? And...(yeah)...

Ernestine: I think it's a natural thing uh, you know, it's not headline news every day; there's gonna be some stuff that pushes it off and right so; space shuttle explosion uh, all the...the things that happened to the terroists, and all those things are things of concern to us. Uh, to all of us, all Americans, not just Vietnam veterans. But I think that...that I see other signs that are real positive the uh, commander of the space shuttle was identified as a ...as a Vietnam veterans, a declarated Vietnam veteran. Uh, I read stories in the paper that if somebody is going for political office or somebody has just done something really nice in the community or maybe if you ain't done something real nice the usually identify it as a Vietnam veteran. Sometimes a much declarated Vietnam veteran. These are real positive things. They are the kind of things you see that happened with WWII veterans. It's acceptance. It's acceptance. And that's I think, as much as anything what I wanted. It was never my idea to shove us out, as you know number one, we don't rate that. What we do rate is our place in society.

John: Has that made it uh, the role of the ...the centers a little easier then that more people are volunteering uh, to come forward now?

Ernestine: Yeah, I think it has.

John: Just a couple of general uh, comments uh, or observations. What is the...what is the employment profile of Vietnam veterans in the state of West Virginia?

Ernestine: Geez, (I realize there's statistical things), yeah, there are. I don't want to give you those, (both talking at the same time-inaudible) To give it to you in a word? Poor. We probably still have a 25-35% higher and probably higher than that.

As high as 40% uh, higher rate of unemployment than do other age groups across the state. Uh, that is part of what I mentioned when I talked about the...the effects of the war and the years after. The fifteen or so years that a guy may have gone without treatment. This is my own personal opinion and haven't really heard anybody else talk about it. Uh, maybe they don't want to talk about it either, and job service is not gonna publish that sort of thing. My question is, if the man went from 1970 to 1982 or '83 without treatment, then received his treatment over a two-year period there is a space of 13 or 14 years there that that emotional scarring was deep and I don't think it can be cured. And what is it what has it cost him for those years and what is his future? And I think that's one reason you're still seeing such a high rate of unemployment among Vietnam veterans. I don't guess I'm gonna find anybody who is going to answer my question. (uh-huh) And maybe I'm being overly pessimistic, but it just seems to me that that it's just too late for some guys to turn that around.

John: Are uh, suicide rates among West Virginia (yes), Vietnam vets?

Ernestine: Yeah, last year before last we had nine uh, last year seven that I know of, and I don't have any official access to this kind of information. Those are just the ones that...that I investigated and was told for sure, that yes, the guy shot himself or you know, uh, there...there's always uh, one car accidents, you know, the guy hit the bridge doing sixty and that's a suicide gesture. That's more of a gesture. He took himself out. But those can't be proved. (uh-huh) State Police tell you well, this is more than likely a deliberate thing. That's still high uh, nationally.

John: In a whisper - "let me see something a minute." Long pause. There's a couple things I want to ask you (clears throat), off the tape when we get done but uh, well, give us a summary then uh, of what your plan is. Are you gonna stay? Are you gonna main...try to maintain your office as President uh, after this year? And you said you've said you've got a lot of things you want to do still? (uh) And your schooling too, I know you're still going to school.

Ernestine: Yeah, that's been really hard. My schedule is unbelievable. I would not have thought two or three years ago that I could maintain a schedule particularly as I approach middle-age. It would have been a killer when I was 25. And I probably had more sense at 25 than to (laughing), do it but uh, (your age is?), 45. (45, okay) Yeah, but yes, to answer the question, I am gonna uh, continue. I'll continue until June and on our next State Council meeting put the proposal to them. At National Convention they adopted amendment to the uh, constitution that states that State Council official delegates uh, their tenure would be two years. Uh, what I'd like to do is work out a system where that I can extend my _____ for two years; I don't want to do this year and then do a two year, that's three years,

and that's (uh-huh), longer than I'm willing to commit myself (uh-huh). But this year and one more would be about right and if we can hit on a way to do that, then uh, I'll stay on.

John: What was...just out of curiosity, what was the delegate total at this convention say as opposed to the Washington one two years ago. Bigger?

Ernestine: Bigger? I'm not sure if I can tell, yeah, because the uh, the base for selection of delegates expanded, the number of chapters, the number of members per chapter. Uh, Chapter 38 in West Virginia had more than sixty members. If you had 50, you could...you're entitled to two delegates. Huntington came on line with uh, one I don't know, had forty probably, at large members. So, we can and I was entitled to a seat as a delegate. So, we wound up with uh, five votes at that thing. So, you're uh, you're basic membership thing had expanded over uh, (so you're memberships growing?) then I understand, yeah. Oh, yeah, I...I just made that point at the uh, veterans day uh, ceremony at particularly to Governor Moore. I wanted to let him know that (laughs)...you know, we're not the city bitsy little bunch of people that you were talking to three or four years ago and paying not much attention to. (uh-huh) There are more than uh, there were more than 27,000 in 1983 and there's about 27,000 now. So, and here in West Virginia you know, we've ...it's just steadily growing. Not in great big bunches but just steadily.

John: Whispered - that's good?