Interview with John Metzger

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Interviewer: H. Wayne Wilson

A Note to the Reader

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Metzger: I'm John A. Metzger. J-o-h-n. A. And Metzger is M-e-t-z-g-e-r. I don't know why I'm hoarse.

Wilson: It's all right. It's a Monday. We're all that way, I think, at the beginning of the week.

Metzger: It's raining outside.

Wilson: Yeah that, too. The weather's miserable. Would you please, same thing, state and spell your place of birth.

Metzger: I was born in Paducah, Kentucky. P-a-d-u-c-a-h. Kentucky.

Wilson: And could you just say your birth date?

Metzger: January 13, 1946.

Wilson: Very good. Well, before we get started on some of these questions, I think it's really important to find out who subjects are and where they come from. So you were born in Paducah. Is that were you grew up?

Metzger: I grew up in Metropolis, Illinois.

Wilson: Oh, very good. My friend comes from there. Now, Metropolis, it's not the smallest town on earth, but it's kind of a small community. Can you talk a little bit about what life is like in Metropolis?

Metzger: Well, Metropolis, of course, is like, I would say, ninety percent of the small towns in southern Illinois, or Illinois, period. Went to Metropolis High School. It's the home of Superman. The Superman festival is coming up there this next weekend. And that, growing up there is pretty, pretty simple.

Wilson: Talk a little bit about your family. Did you have brothers or sisters?

Metzger: I have nine brothers. No, four brothers. There's nine children in our family. Five brothers and four sisters. Four brothers and four sisters. I'll get it right. It's a large family, Catholic family, and, let's see. My family was in the meat business in Metropolis. In Paducah, my dad had a long-standing family business, they made meat products, Metzger Meats out of Paducah. They lived in Metropolis. I don't know what else you want me to say about my family.

Wilson: It's always nice to hear where we grew up and where we come from.

Metzger: After I finished high school there, I went to SIU. It was just what you did. Everybody went to college. And in those days, you kind of went to college to keep from being drafted. I did, anyway. And when I came back from the Army, I went back to SIU and studied history. Both, first two degrees are in history there, and my PhD is in educational leadership where I became a school superintendent after that.

Wilson: Where?

Metzger: In Johnson City. Actually, I was in Benton a lot, but last place was in Johnson City.

Wilson: Okay, very good, very good. And what year did you get your PhD?

Metzger: 1982.

Wilson: Okay. I was, I was around then.

Metzger: Well, I studied about Delyte Morris and how he helped grow SIU with the use of his school board. That's related to educational leadership. School board helps schools, obviously. They don't just regulate them. They help superintendents and college presidents through their contacts and get the money that helps grow the places. So that's why I was interest, to me.

Wilson: President Morris is an extremely fascinating person too.

Metzger: Oh yeah, if you got a look at his papers, go into collections up there, just box after box of yellow legal pads, and his. He could… as I looked at him over his years, you could see his scribbling got a little bit less legible, but he kept a lot of notes. What he was doing, obviously, you have to know what you're doing. Who he talked to, what he talked about, who promised what and all that. It was pretty interesting.

Wilson: Yeah, it's getting better. How old were you when you first became of a conflict in Vietnam?

Metzger: Well, actually, that's an easy question to answer because I was going to U of I. My first year in college I went to U of I, and then I came back down to Southern. And one of the speech class assignments was to defend or attack the United States' involvement in Vietnam, and so I had to give a speech on it. And I was all for it at that point, back in '64. First year in college. Pretty interesting to see how my attitude kind of changed over the years.

Wilson: I want to keep track of that. So let's say that again just so I can make that a point. Your first year in college, your thoughts on the Vietnam War were something that had to be done.

Metzger: Yep.

Wilson: Was the spread of Communism a…?

Metzger: The domino theory, the spread of Communism, yeah. The reasoning behind it, if you didn't stop them there, they were going to be living right here in the United States. And they are, by the way.

Wilson: I know. It's amazing how things come true.

Metzger: It is, really.

Wilson: My generation, well not really my generation, but I think the younger generation, you can always ask them, where were you when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 happened, and almost all of them can say precisely, even if they were in grade school, yes, I was in Ms. Whoever's class, and I remember that happening. And I find that with my parents' generation, the baby boomer generation, almost everyone has that same ability to recall where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated. Do you remember, where you?

Metzger: Oh yeah. I was in study hall at Metropolis High School in the afternoon, well about noon, study hall. And you can remember things like, I guess Kent State was a big event, kind of the anti-war movement. And while I was in Vietnam in 1969, at SIU, that's when Old Main burned, burned during the riots. And I remember coming back from Vietnam, back to SIU, or not really back from Vietnam, but then I came back in January, went down and served in Fort Gordon, Georgia for six months. And then I got out in June, and when I went back to SIU that summer, the streets along, well I forgot the name of the street, but anyway, along the main drag there downtown, they were all boarded up with plywood and stuff because of the riots. Well, they let school

out early that year, in May that year. But anyway, that's when, you remember the anti-war movement, Kent State, and the burning of Old Main. Kind of being a history student, I was, that's where professors were, and that's where our offices were.

Wilson: Okay, we'll go with that. Okay, hypothetical, this is almost a thought experiment. So there's no right or wrong answer, it's just your opinion, cause no one has the answer to this. If President Kennedy wasn't assassinated and he had won a second term, do you think our involvement in Vietnam would've been different in any way?

Metzger: Well, from study of history, the answer to that is no. He probably would've taken us right down the same path. We might not have gotten quite as involved. I mean, it kind of swallowed us up. But I think he had us headed there.

Wilson: Let's just follow that train just a little bit with the next few presidents. Lyndon B. Johnson, in the beginning, some evidence to say that he was reluctant to push us forward near the end of his presidency, obviously a lot less reluctant, a lot more hawkish, obviously with Robert McNamara backing his policies. What are your thoughts about the Johnson Administration as far as their foreign policy? Do you think that they were going the right path or?

Metzger: I don't have a lot of opinion on that. I know it caused him to quit being President, deciding not to run. I kind of wonder how anybody could really want to be President, cause all the things go on, and you're just part of it.

You're not really leading a lot of it, you're just reacting to a lot of it, and I think that's what happened to him.

Wilson: That's very true. That's very true. Now, were you drafted, or did you enlist?

Metzger: Well, my deferments for being a student finally ended when I graduated the first time in 1968. I had a low draft number, and so it was obvious I was going to get to be a soldier. And instead of being drafted, there was a two-year enlistment at that time, and so I decided to join for two years rather than be drafted because I figured, well, I'd rather be in basic training in the summer than the winter. So that's what happened. I joined up and just quit fighting the idea of being in the Army, resisting it, I should say. I quit resisting that idea, and figured I was going to have to do what everybody else was doing then. I was married at that time. I went into the Army in July, and I got married in December before that to my high school sweetheart. We had no children, of course, at that time. You can also get a deferment as a teacher, and I was a teacher then, on a provisional certificate over in Missouri where we lived the last quarter that I was a student after I got married. We lived over just across the Chester Bridge in Missouri. And these people wanted, the administration over there wanted me to continue my deferment and become a teacher there, and I was, just said, I did this long enough. It's time to become a soldier. Just because I wasn't going to not be one, that wasn't something that would be acceptable to my family, me, anyone.

Wilson: You felt some obligation to do that?

Metzger: To be a soldier? Yeah, definitely. It wasn't a big tradition in my family. I had an older brother who'd been in the military, and a brother-in-law who'd been in the Korean conflict. Just patriotism, I guess. I was going to do my duty.

Wilson: Did you have a, what were you hoping, I don't like the phrasing of this question, they say, what were you hoping to do in Vietnam? Did you have a goal, going over there?

Metzger: Well, once I got into the military, basic training and all that, all these at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, everybody there was talking about going to Vietnam, being assigned to their infantry, artillery, and I didn't much want to do that. In fact before that, of course having my college degree already, recruiters wanted me to be an officer. I didn't much want to do that either because you hear all the stories about how long an officer might live over there in that war. So as I was in basic training, they came around one day and asked if anybody wanted to be, volunteer to be a chaplain's assistant. And so, infantry, artillery, chaplain's assistant. Well, that sounded a little bit more up my alley. So I said, "Yeah, I'll do that." So they checked with the priest in my Catholic family I told you about. And I guess they did, they said they did. And got a good reference as my background, I guess, and so they made my MOS chaplain's assistant, which, a chaplain's assistant is a person who assists the chaplain in anything he wants to do. Like driving places, serve mass, count the people in the service, run his office for him, type for him, drive him. That's the job of the chaplain's assistant. You don't have to preach, yourself, but you help.

Wilson: You assist.

Metzger: You assist, okay, so then the training for the chaplain's assistant was in Fort, first you went to clerk typist school. That's your next training, AIT they call it, advanced training. And so I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey for that, clerk typist training. And then the next spot after that was Fort Hamilton, New York, which was right at the base of New York City, where the Verrazano Bridge is, and that was where the, like a six weeks training about what a chaplain's assistant really does. So I was kind of a pretty good student, and I was the number one graduate in that class, which helped me out, really, not just to be bragging. But when I got to Vietnam, they were looking for an assignment for you at that point, and they said, well, we could use you, since you were such a graduate, use you in the support command headquarters. So I had a nicer assignment that way. Rather than being out in the field, as a chaplain's assistant I got to be in the office, sort of, and support. So it kind of added up for me.

Wilson: Did you serve in that role throughout your time in Vietnam?

Metzger: Yeah. I was chaplain's assistant for that year over there. I was in Vietnam from January to January of 1969. A lot of people had the opportunity to extend, stay and then be dismissed from the Army or let out, honorably discharged, if you would extend like another month, but I didn't want to do that. So I came back and went to Fort Gordon, Georgia, as a safety NCO for that, another support type assignment. And Fort Gordon, Georgia is in

Augusta, Georgia. Got to go see the Masters that year. In fact, that was one of the benefits of being in the military at that time. There was a benefit. If you would wear a uniform, like when I was in New York, we could go downtown and watch the plays and ride the subway for free, get into the plays for free on Broadway, all the museums let you in free. So that was a neat thing.

Wilson: Can you talk about your first day off the plane in Vietnam? A lot of people talk about the culture shock.

Metzger: Yeah. Can we go back and talk about my first day?

Wilson: Yeah, absolutely.

Metzger: Can we talk about my first day in basic training?

Wilson: Let's do the first day in basic training.

Metzger: Speaking of culture shock. That was, when we went to St. Louis, my wife and I went over there to St. Louis. We went to the ball game that night, and then they put you on that bus the next morning, and then at the Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, also known as Fort Lost in the Woods, Misery.

Anyway, you had, "Hurry up! Get this! Pick that up! Let's go!' You get military-wired real quick. "What do you mean you don't want to run? We're running with this bag, pick it up, soldier! Get down and give me ten pushups, or give me twenty!" And that's the first day.

Okay, going back to the first day in Vietnam, we went over there on a passenger plane. Huge plane. And they had them especially squeezed up in the plane. The seats were pushed together more than they usually are, I thought, anyway. And they land on the way over there at Guam to refuel. And then they land at Tan Son Nhat Airport, which is the place where all the soldiers that I know of, anyway, came in through. And at that point, they, that's where they made this assignment, where I was to go to Qui Nhơn in support command. Q-u-i N-h-o-n, Qui Nhơn, Vietnam in support command. And I was assigned to Chaplain Russell, Jack Russell, Catholic priest. Anyway, how was that first day of the culture shock? Well, you know. You had a barracks you had and slept in, and then they put you on another airplane, a smaller plane that flew you up to Qui Nhơn. And when you got there, they took you to a place, a barracks, this is your room. It wasn't a room, this is where you're sleeping. We made rooms in them with plywood and things like that. We built ourselves little cubicles. I had roommates. And over there is your office, that's where I worked, at an office. And that's where you eat, that's where you sleep, that's where you're going to work. There. Welcome to Vietnam.

Wilson: Talked a little in your bio here, maybe you can expand upon it a bit, about the Camp Granite attacks?

Metzger: Yeah, that was the name of the compound we were at, was Camp Granite. And it was at the, we were on the beach. Qui Nhơn is a beach city, the ocean right out there, and behind it is some low mountains, we'll call them. They're not real high, they're big hills, kind of like around here, really. And you had

your barracks and your support command headquarters at the base of this hill around you, so the enemy, which in our case was never North Vietnamese, it was always Viet Cong in this area. The VC, we'd call them, they would send up sappers, these are like sneak attack people with explosives. And they would sneak onto the hills behind you and they would send, attack your, the base. Rocket attacks and they just sneaked down in sometimes, just exploded everything. It wasn't suicide attacks. They would plant them and then leave. The purpose of Qui Nhơn, this is where they loaded, they stored the gas and the supplies that went further inland to the war. That was a pipeline from Qui Nhơn up into in country, and so ships would come in, unload their supplies, and it was our job to move supplies onto the war. So as a Chaplain's assistant, got to take care of all the needs, which would be like praying and religious services.

Wilson: Did it, just because of the nature of your service, was it, I'm trying to phrase this properly, was it ever difficult to be spiritual? For someone, like, to help someone, even if you, yourself, that moment, didn't quite maybe feel it? Or was it always kind of natural to you?

Metzger: Well, it was basically still just a job. For me, it's just my nature. I'm sure there was some of them who, some of the assistants who probably were more spiritual than I was. But on a typical Sunday, we would have eight masses that we went to. And every day of the week, we had like five or six, so on a typical week, I would go to church eight and, six times six, thirty six, about forty to fifty times a week. And so I would deal with the Catholics, so, just like an

altar boy. You read homily, you pour the wine in the chalice and that sort of thing. And after you're done with that you count how many people were there. I got twenty-five at this service, you got paperwork that you turn in. Military counts the bodies, they also count how many people came to this, how many bullets they used, how much wine they used. And you passed the plate, collection plate. People gave a little offering. And from support command, you went out to the other places where the services were being held. They didn't come to you. You went to them. Some of them came in, but most of them, we went out to them. And then my job on Mondays was everybody brought their money to me. We kept a set of books on the offerings, which we used in our office, the offerings were collected and used however the commander wanted to use them. The priest at that time, he gave them to the Catholic school and that sort of thing in Qui Nhơn.

Wilson: What was it like, because you said the Viet Cong would attack, I mean, obviously, you were living very close to the enemy lines. What is your mentality knowing that the enemy is just so close to you at all times, really?

Metzger: Well, that's the way it was in Vietnam. You didn't know if this Vietnamese was on your side or that one was on the other side. The ones that came in and worked for us into our compound, they would clean your hooches, we called them, that would be your room, your hut, in our case, your barracks. They would also wash your clothes and shine your shoes and they worked for you. We had an office boy that swept up in the office where I was. Seemed to me

like he was never there the day after an attack but that was maybe just supposition. I think I got a picture of him in one of those.

Wilson: Oh, sure.

Metzger: But they were, don't let me forget to tell you about that too, right on the back side of our compound, SIU had a branch over there in Qui Nhơn for a few years. It was something to look up sometime. It was called SIU Qui Nhơn. And I decided I was going to go over to see it cause I'm an SIU student, and it was kind of like a junior college type thing, except not quite that big. Maybe seven or eight classrooms and an office, built pretty nicely.

Wilson: And they would help soldiers get their degrees or?

Metzger: No, not soldiers. For Vietnamese. This was all about.

Wilson: Oh, this is for the Vietnamese people. I'm sorry. I got you, I understand.

Metzger: It wasn't about soldiers going to school. It was all about helping pacify, what are you going to call it, the local people. Help them. Kind of like, now in the war over in Iraq or Afghanistan, it's a big thing about helping the economy where these people will want to be on our side, not their side. So that's what they did there. And I just remembered that, kind of forgot about that Qui Nhơn Salukis.

Wilson: Talk a little bit about your assignment for the sacrament of last rites. It says here that you would drive the chaplain to the morgue.

Metzger: Well, that was probably my least favorite duty, obviously. Part of what, in the Catholic religion, the last rites, you know, they have the priest to put the oils on the head of the person who died. So being in support, you wouldn't think about the people who died, but they were brought out of the country where they might've had their fights with the enemy, and they were put in the morgue, and they would be taken in ships, airplanes. They had a big airport right there, too. Taken back to the United States. So the Chaplain would get calls, and every so often. Actually, how often was it, probably once or twice a week. And we had to go to the morgue and I worked for the priest, so that was part of my job. We also had another guy who helped the priest, too. He did this too. So he'd go to the, they were in body bags, and you unzip them, kind of hold it out of the way so the priest can put the oil on whatever's still in that body bag. A lot of times it was not really recognizable, that's some of the trauma you might still remember, but anyway. So one of the jobs I had to do. Needless to say, I delegated that job as often as I could.

Wilson: Can't imagine how difficult that would be. Talk a little bit, because you say it here, about, cause you just said the bodies would be in various states of dismemberment due to combat. Put us there. You talked about the smells and the sights. I just think that we could paint a pretty adequate picture for someone listening at home. So you walk in the morgue. Sort of put us there a little bit more. You open a body bag. Is there an experience that just sort of stands out for you?

Metzger: Well, those are the kind of things that you try to forget. But I don't know if you probably want to use this or not, but we, jokingly, we could call them crispy critters. Sure not proud of that, but you know. And we sometimes we would do that. Anyway, they would be, obviously it was hot over there, wasn't air conditioning. So things were in the state of decomposing, and the smell. Kept the flies out as much as you could. Vietnam is a very hot place, you know. Got used to, when I got there, got used to the heat, more or less. Seventy degrees was cool. Hundred and ten or so was normal, for me. And it rained. The monsoon came. So they had a season of rain, where like today is a very rainy day here. But when it let up during the monsoon, when it let up to like it is now, we kind of thought it quit. You just got used to it, you get used to that weather. So you had the smells, you had the flies, it's just the way it was. Even though this was a place built to take bodies out of the country, it still was, you can look at pictures, things were temporary. We weren't planning to stay there forever. Now, we always joked about how good the Air Force guys had it because their buildings were more substantial than ours.

Wilson: Now, did you say the chaplain's name was Russell?

Metzger: Yeah, Father Jack Russell.

Wilson: Talk a little bit about him. Who is he?

Metzger: Well, he came from Boston. And I always thought, he was kind of a little short, stocky, redheaded, like you might think an Irishman from Boston would be. He was a little on the crotchety side, too, I would say. I figured, how'd

they get a Catholic chaplain? Probably didn't necessarily volunteer, although some of them did, I'd say, but the bishops assigned him to the military. So let's see, I got five guys here, pretty good priests, that one over there, he's going. So that's the way I figured, anyway. And he was probably about, oh, sixty at that time, maybe fifty-five to sixty. And he had high blood pressure, I'll tell you that, because he'd get so mad the blood would just kind of pop out on his neck at times. And he'd say, "Metzger, if you don't shape up, I'm going to send you to Cần Thơ ." And I'd say, "Oh no, Father, don't send me there." It was kind of funny. And we always made jokes about how the lifers were, what we called the lifers, those were the ones in the military to stay, as opposed to the ones who were there just cause we had to be. But he, well in order to make more rank and to get more pay and privileges, we thought, you know, you'd better get where the war is cause that's where you get your medals, that's where you get known. But really looking back on it, he was probably doing his duty cause that's where he was needed also.

Wilson: And you served under him for your duration for that year?

Metzger: Yeah. Worked for the same guy for a year. And we'd, he was my immediate supervisor. And our office, talk about your office in Vietnam, there were about three or four chaplain's assistants. And then the other chaplains in the area reported to Father Russell, and they would out be living in the forward positions and things. Some of them were like younger, nicer people, in my opinion. But kind of the military way.

Wilson: Talk a little bit about, because I have a brilliant note here, and I'm going to butcher the name. Pleiku trip?

Metzger: Pleiku.

Wilson: Pleiku. I was so close but so far.

Metzger: Pleiku and An Khê. Father Russell liked to travel as much as he could in Vietnam. I kind of thought it was just, as I just said, maybe a way for him to make rank, move up in the ranks. But anyway, he decided he was going to go to Pleiku, which was about a four-hour jeep ride out to the west of Qui Nhơn. Of course, I couldn't see any reason to be going there, but he had a reason. He wanted to go up and see some people that he knew, and so his drivers, that would be me and, we had a sergeant that was over at the rest of the office, and another young man, a chaplain's assistant like me. We all, that was four of us in the jeep, that's how many of us would fit in there. And that's, we decided we would go up there. Well, he decided, so we had to take him. The purpose of the trip was to deliver communion hosts and sacramental wine up to where the chaplains needed them in Pleiku. I'm kind of glad we went on that trip now, looking back on it, but I wasn't too in favor of it at that time. But it was, got to see the countryside, got to go through the An Khê Pass, which was the road that went up through the mountains. An Khê was the site of where the French Army was finally defeated as they left Vietnam. As they were leaving, they were ambushed in this An Khê Pass. They had a memorial in the Pass to the French soldiers who died there. Also a place called Dien Bien Phu was

where they were actually defeated in their last battle against Ho Chi Minh. But left through An Khê Pass and out through Qui Nhơn. So we headed out from Qui Nhơn on a blacktop road that was used by our convoys, which took the supplies from Qui Nhơn up into the country where the more intense fighting was. We had our rifles and we had grenade launchers in our jeep with us. And also, mounted on the jeep was an M60, which is kind of like a machine gun. Still can't believe we did that. We didn't fly in a helicopter. We just drove.

Wilson: What was going through your mind at that time? Was it scary?

Metzger: Well, I didn't drive. I sat in the back.

Wilson: Oh sure, but was it a little unnerving?

Metzger: I'd say, yeah, because you could feel them as you went through the pass, especially, that they were there watching you. And they just decided that we weren't the target of the day, cause every convoy that went through this pass up to Pleiku, down the road, was probably, almost everyone of them would be ambushed. That's just part of the job of the truck drivers to be ambushed, get their supplies through. So you could feel the hair on the back of your neck kind of stand up. You knew they were watching you. It just wasn't our time to be attacked. Also, along the road was the pipeline that took the gas and oil up to these inland places, and as it shows there, I got pictures of bodies where some of the VC had been ambushed themselves, trying to blow up that pipeline. That's pretty gruesome. One of them had their toothbrush there and their toothpaste. And they just, they ended their lives, which thankfully it

wasn't us. So we went up there, all the way to Pleiku, and we spent the night with that chaplain's group, and then drove back the next day. Uneventful, really, except for seeing these bodies along the road, and feeling that they were watching you. But they didn't attack us.

Wilson: Thank God.

Metzger: Would've been easy pickings.

Wilson: My goodness. It's so interesting to, not interesting, well interesting, and almost unimaginable sometimes when you hear stories. Just to drive was to put yourself in harm's way. Just to go out on the open road was a gigantic risk, really.

Metzger: Another place Father Russell liked to go was to the leprosarium. A leprosarium was a place where they kept lepers, more or less, quarantined from the regular population because that was, we don't really have that much in America. I think there's a few lepers down in Louisiana area, or there used to be, but it was a real problem in that third country of Vietnam. And Qui Nhơn has been a French city. Vietnam's a French colony, Qui Nhơn was a French city, a Catholic city in that mind. By the way, it was a city of about two hundred fifty thousand people in Qui Nhơn. So he would want to drive out to the leprosarium, which you left our compound and drove out about five miles out to the countryside, and drove to this really beautiful spot, believe it or not. It was a beautiful beach, you might think, I always thought, "Man, this would be a great tourist attraction someday." Had the church there and the

dorms where these people lived. In the French missionary tradition, all visitors always had wine and cake. Now, they didn't give us wine, but they gave us cakes. It was kind of like, it was just part of the hospitality of the place, traditional. Kind of like in the old world. We had like sponge cake. Anyway. The priest, of course, the other ranking people would get the wine, too. And we would go out there and visit with them a little bit. I don't know really what the purpose was. They didn't tell us what we were doing out there, but just to go see the other priests, I guess, what we thought he was doing. Later on, it became not quite as beautiful a place because they used the Agent Orange to defoliate the palm trees along the beach, which I, what do I know, but it didn't seem like it was a place that was threatened. But during the year, the palm trees were defoliated by Agent Orange.

Wilson: What is Agent Orange?

Metzger: Agent Orange, as far as I know, is a chemical that you would use, it's a herbicide to kill foliage. So the reason the military used it was to get rid of the brush where the enemy would hide, so it was a lot easier to fight them if you could see them. So you sprayed Agent Orange. As I'm sure you've heard, it was a big health problem to the soldiers who actually handled it and were exposed to it. Cause you would spray it out of helicopters and then breathe it in, get it on your skin. And a lot of veterans now experience things like, oh maybe cancer or diabetes, heart disease, they link it back to this Agent Orange, which just kind of makes it one of the long-term problems of the war. Not just the fifty-eight thousand people who died then, but the long-term

problems to their health from Agent Orange, and from the PTSD memories. But anybody who served their country in wartime has been through that.

Wilson: Absolutely.

Metzger: So we went out to there, to the leprosarium. I probably never seen a leper, but it was kind of interesting experience for me because they would have fingers be gone, hands gone. I remember seeing several, their noses were gone, and they would have like a cork where your nose was supposed to be. I guess it kind of make your face a little.

Wilson: Like a wine cork, almost?

Metzger: Yeah. Well, kind of a, more of a, about that big around. But their ears would be gone, noses gone. We were sure it wasn't catching, though.

Wilson: I would imagine. Did you have to take any precautions while you were there? Extra precautions as far as contamination or anything like that?

Metzger: Not really. I don't really know how it's passed now, but I know it's not just one of those things.

Wilson: Sure, sure. Excuse me. Let's hit some of these questions from WTVP so I do not forget. Let's talk a little bit about the protests back at home because they were a big thing. And they ranged. You had peaceful protests from, perhaps, some of the hippie movement. You also had the other extreme. You had the Black Panthers, you had the Weathermen, who went underground after

targeting government buildings. You had the gentleman who lit himself on fire outside of Robert McNamara's office, almost taking his child with him. What were your thoughts, let's bifurcate this a bit, what were your thoughts of the protests before you went in?

Metzger: Well, they intensified with time. And I was in the military, I was in Vietnam from January to January, '69 to '70. And as we, as the war, I guess, Tet Offensive came along, we're supposed to be winning this, and here they can kill a lot of our soldiers and take back any cities they want to. Obviously, we haven't won, so that kind of intensified and gave strength to the anti-war movement. So here I am over in Vietnam at the time that they burned down Old Main, for instance, on the SIU campus. Kent State happened at the same time. We really, you just couldn't concentrate on it. You were there to do your job as your soldier and stay alive. And it was just something that was going on.

Wilson: When you returned home, did you have any experiences with protestors? A lot of veterans talk about negative experiences.

Metzger: I kind of stayed away from that sort of thing. I came back. I got an early out. I got out of the military six weeks early to start back in summer school at SIU. I went back there to get my master's degree. They got me out of the military early. The Army didn't need me, obviously. I was not going to be one of them. So came back to SIU, as I said earlier, and the streets were boarded up, the glass all broken out from the protests, and started back to school. I didn't

really get involved in that, anti-war protests. I wanted to resume my life. And one of the positive things to say about it was, I was given the GI Bill, so every bit of schooling I did after my first degree was paid for by the US government, state of Illinois, whatever. Free books. Pretty well. So that was a good thing.

Wilson: That is a good thing. That's a very good thing.

Metzger: And I like to think, at times, maybe I did return something back to society as a, it wasn't all bad. Got to go to war, yay. But I was there, and as I came back, as a result, got to go to school free and became a school superintendent. And I like to think I left some places better than I found them, so there was a positive side to that.

Wilson: It's always nice to hear that, actually. Another note here. Could you just talk about the helicopter flights to artillery bases?

Metzger: Well, as I said earlier, we, part of the main job as a chaplain's assistant was to go out to the, assist the priest at his services. So sometimes we went on the road. A lot of times we went in the helicopters. And the artillery bases were out around Qui Nhơn. They would shoot artillery in support of ground troops who were fighting in other areas out away from us. So we would fly out there with the priest and have mass there, go to another one, have mass on Sundays especially. Weekdays, it didn't matter. We'd visit each one once a week, generally. And you fly out there and have the service. They might be shooting while you're having the service. You had to hold onto your plate cause

vibrating from the… People were shooting at us, we were shooting at them. Anyway.

Wilson: Yeah, no, did you, excuse me, on the, had a question here, where was it.

Metzger: Well, I got to remember one other thing I should say just.

Wilson: Oh, please go ahead. I was lost in my own thought there for a moment.

Metzger: I was in support command. People don't probably think about this, but we did. We had flush toilets, hot showers, and air-conditioned office. And nobody believed that in Vietnam, but one of the benefits where I worked. Our barracks didn't have that. We had a fan, electric fan. That would be a lot for the guys who I've talked to, who just stayed out in the bushes, but yeah. That was kind of a, I always say, well I was in Vietnam, but I had flush toilets, hot shower, and air-conditioned office to work in, even though it was just a window unit. But that's what a lot of us back at SIU had at the same time, too. We also, at Qui Nhơn, had a beach that was ours, not too far away from our compound. And when we weren't working, which you worked pretty well seven days a week, but now and then you'd get a little time off, we could go to the beach and swim, or they had little sunfish sailboats there. I'm a sailor now. I have been since that time, and that's where I learned to sail, is in Vietnam.

Wilson: Interesting.

Metzger: Kind of interesting, yeah. You didn't really want to swim too much in this water, though, because it was the ocean. It was kind of going down to Biloxi area, if you get an idea of that kind of a beach, but over on this side, about three or four hundred yards away, the Vietnamese that lived in Qui Nhơn and didn't have plumbing, they would go to the beach and do their morning constitutional on the beach, waiting for the tide to come in and flush it. So that wasn't that far from our beach, so you kind of had to be careful. But we did get in the water some, and I was just, the beach is always interesting.

Wilson: Oh yeah.

Metzger: And at different times we would have like, I remember, at that time there was a movie, I forget the name of it, where they ate the, had a contest to see who could eat the most boiled eggs. We did that. We had a contest like.

Wilson: *Cool Hand Luke.*

Metzger: Yeah, on the Fourth of July we're going to have a contest to see who could eat the most, or the most hot dogs or something, just something to.

Wilson: Was it you?

Metzger: No I didn't win. I didn't want to get involved in too much.

Wilson: Sure.

Metzger: And another thing we did, we had to do guard duty around our compound. As I told you, we had the tank farms up the road, and you still had to be, make

sure the sappers didn't sneak in on you. We couldn't do nothing about the rockets, but you still had to do guard duty. So everybody in the compound did that. You would be on the perimeter in these guard towers, which is the typical scene from Vietnam, probably a picture there. So you get to, on guard duty, you, everybody was assigned on a rotating basis. And you had to be inspected before you went on guard duty. And you would be on, the night was divided into three shifts, so you'd be on like four hours, and off four hours, and on four hours. You'd do that and around the compound. Also we had to go out to the tank farms and do that, and also up on that mountain, Vung Chua Mountain, you'd kind of had rats up in there where you'd go sit and stay. Hopefully some VC would come by and you would get to ambush them. Out in the tank farms: I'll never forget this one evening I was on the gate. My job was to guard the gate. I had a guy who I would take turns with. He was a sleep, I'd be awake, and vice versa. So it was his turn to be awake, and I was rudely awakened by our military police with their dogs kind of circling the tank farm. The tank farm is a set of tanks where they stored petroleum products. But this guy was asleep instead of being awake, and so they were honking the horn and standing there waiting for us to open the gates. So that was the last time I slept that night, obviously. And that young man, he was eighteen years old, which I was already twenty-three or twenty-four by then. He was from Possum Trot, Kentucky, so that's just past Paducah. So we had to do that, the guard duty, and so it wasn't all peaches and cream.

Wilson: Sure, sure, yeah. Did you ever experience combat during those?

Metzger: Well, in the guard duty, yeah. You had to. As far as a large-scale North Vietnamese attack, no. But VC here and there, seeing the bodies, the remains of it, yeah. Not hand-to-hand by any means. I was fortunate. Like I said, back in basic training, I said, oh, chaplain's assistant. Maybe I won't have to go to Vietnam, that was the first thought. And once you're there, maybe I won't have to do quite the things that these other people are getting ready to do, so.

Wilson: Let's talk a little bit about, you said you got your, you were processed to go home six weeks early so you can get back in school. What was going through your mind when you got the news that you would be going back?

Metzger: A chance to get out. You know, people, I guess, human nature, whatever, always want to be doing something different than they are doing.

Wilson: That's true.

Metzger: But I was, I didn't have a strong military tradition in my family, but I knew I was going to serve. I didn't extend in Vietnam, like they said. I could've stayed over there and just be discharged as soon as you landed back in the United States. I didn't do that because I didn't want to stay over there any longer than I had to. When we first got there, the Camp Granite attacks weren't quite as often, but they seemed to be picking up.

Wilson: So you saw a marked change from the amount of attacks from the time you started to when you actually were processed out.

Metzger: Right. In fact, towards the end of, we had rockets actually land in neighboring barracks and kill some of the guys staying there, living there. Anyway, so it was going through my mind, a chance to get out, process out, quick as you can, get back to SIU and get on with my life. Get back to, literally, my wife, that sort of thing.

Wilson: It's very nice to hear that you were able to come back and accomplish, I mean, you're still accomplishing things, but you're still accomplishing things, but you were able to accomplish so much, just back. Was there a period of decompression for you, on the way back? That you just had to get used to civilian life?

Metzger: Yeah, that's, and it was, as you'll hear from a lot of Vietnam veterans, there was no parades, no welcome home. I never was spat upon, as I hear some of the soldiers say, but I remember coming home. My wife lived in, she lived with her parents at the time that I was over there, and they lived in New Jersey at that time. Anyway, we met in Philadelphia, so I was flown to Philadelphia Airport in the winter, January. It was getting chilly there that night, and we'd just come from a hundred degrees, and you land there. Well, I had, the uniform you had to wear was just lightweight, kind of summer wear, but didn't care, we were going to get back. So that was good. And then you just kind of had to get used to real life again. I remember traveling from there, I drove to here in her car. We met at the airport, went and visited her family, and that was from New York area, Philadelphia area, the big city in the east coast, and we drove back into Kentucky, you know. It's just, Vietnam, east

coast, and then we're in the hills of Kentucky. And then back in, back home for a while, then down to Fort Gordon, Georgia, and then back to SIU as a student again.

Wilson: Do you remember your thoughts when you either saw or read or heard that President Ford was going to pull out the troops. Of course, we have those dramatic images of people hanging onto helicopters trying to get out of there. What were your thoughts as that was going on? You probably have a unique perspective having being there.

Metzger: Well, by that time, we realized we weren't going to win there, and we probably never should've been there to start with, and fifty eight thousand soldiers have died. So it was just part of getting out of it. I was all in favor, though, of the negotiating, ending of the war. I mean, they had to end it some way. We just couldn't stay there. So very dramatic events that you watched. See, that was about five years after 1975, so I'm already back four or five years. And they got to arguing about the shape of the peace talk table, and how to get out was the issue at that point.

Wilson: Do you have any recollections of media coverage, just in general, around that time? I think that was one of the first times that you had Edward R. Murrow during World War II, and you had almost this sense of, there's a theory that no journalism is truly objective. Just reporting on a subject means you're choosing one subject over the other, but I think there was a lot of pride taken among journalists of the Murrow era to be objective. And then once you got in

the Vietnam War, you started to see television personalities, Uncle Walter, start speaking out, start being opinionated. What are your thoughts about the media coverage during that time? Just in general? Do you think it was fair, unfair? Biased?

Metzger: You got to watch it every night at the supper table, the body counts. We killed two hundred of theirs today, and they killed fifty of ours. I've always said, if we added all those body counts up, there wouldn't be anybody left in Vietnam. But it was just every night at supper, which we did sit down in those days and eat supper, you got to watch the war on television. Kind of interesting. And the news coverage we had over there, if you've seen the movie *Good Morning, Vietnam*.

Wilson: I have.

Metzger: That's kind of similar to what my duty station was in the big city, a big city. We would go downtown in the area around the compound when we weren't working. And that got to be pretty dangerous also. Go down to have a beer with the ladies of Vietnam. Hey, GI, you buy me Saigon tea. You know, that's what they called, which is, they would want you to buy them a drink. Come in and have a few beers, go back where you were.

Wilson: This is kind of a hard question because it could be answered in so many ways. We can start wrapping this up a bit, and thank you for your time. We're forty, almost forty years removed. Has your perspective of the war changed at all

over the past several decades, or has it kind of stayed the same since you got out?

Metzger: Oh, I'd say it stayed the same. I mean, it was, when I was there, I knew I had to go, but by '69, '70, it was pretty obvious we weren't going to win it. I was kind of in the middle, you know. It was a waste, in my opinion, of all those people's lives. But you just think about the, what we call then, the military-industrial complex, and war is a big business. But on the other hand, you need to be, have people prepared to fight because we're going to have to do that now and then, or you just won't have that. Our peace is because of our strength, I think, anyway.