

Interview with Paul Wisovaty

VRV-V-D-2015-083

Interview # 1: March 13, 2015

Interviewer: Amanda Wijangco

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Illinois Public Media/WILL or the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from Illinois Public Media/WILL or the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

A Note to the Reader

This transcript is based on an interview recorded by Illinois Public Media/WILL. Readers are reminded that the interview of record is the original video or audio file, and are encouraged to listen to portions of the original recording to get a better sense of the interviewee's personality and state of mind. The interview has been transcribed in near-verbatim format, then edited for clarity and readability. For many interviews, the ALPL Oral History Program retains substantial files with further information about the interviewee and the interview itself. Please contact us for information about accessing these materials.

Wisovaty: My name is Paul Wisovaty. I am 68. I've lived in Tuscola, Illinois for 30 years, and I was a radio operator when I was in Vietnam.

Wijangco: Just think back to who you were before you were drafted and then think about who you were coming out of the war. How are those two people different?

Wisovaty: Well, when I was drafted in 1966 all I was doing with my life was hanging around pool halls in Taylorville, essentially doing nothing and not really planning very much. I was quite immature. After two years of being in the service, of course I was two years older, and I think I had some experiences

that made me a little more mature. When I got out of the service, I immediately enrolled in college here at the U of I. I'm sure I did better than I would have done prior to that.

Wijangco: You said you enrolled at what school?

Wisovaty: The University of Illinois in June of 1968.

Wijangco: In the sixties when the war was going on, the U.S. had a certain way of recruiting young men to go into the army to serve in the military. It wasn't really voluntary. Can you tell us what that process was and how it worked?

Wisovaty: Well, part of the process was voluntary and part of it wasn't. Obviously individuals could join the military if they chose to do so. I had absolutely no interest in joining the United States military, so I was drafted which had the additional benefit in that it was only for a period of two years.

Ledford: Can you tell us more about the draft? Just set up the draft for us if nobody knows what is or has never experienced it. Tell us about that.

Wisovaty: The draft, I won't say it was all inclusive in 1968. Of course women were not subject to the draft. What happened back in certainly during the Vietnam War was that if your parents, which usually meant your father, had enough money or enough political pull, he could get you into the Illinois National Guard. I have no disrespect for the Illinois National Guard. They certainly served valiantly in the Middle East, but during the Vietnam War almost the entire purpose of the National Guard, nationwide, was to keep middle-class and

upper-class white kids from going to Vietnam. Colin Powell said the same thing, so that's just not my prejudiced view.

Wijangco: For the draft, did you have a draft card?

Wisovaty: I had a draft card, and I had a draft number. One day I just got something in the mail which began with the word 'Greetings'. It said something to the effect that I was chosen for the high and distinct honor of serving in the United States Army. I was less than thrilled to death, but I went along with it.

Wijangco: Think back to when you first opened that mail, what did it feel like when you first saw that?

Wisovaty: Oh, it was definitely scary. I don't mean scary from the physical sense of the thought of going to Vietnam. That didn't really cross my mind. It was just scary because I had never been in the military before. I had no particular interest in going to something called basic training and being treated rudely by sergeants and people I didn't know. I was having more fun just shooting pool.

Wijangco: How exactly would you describe your feelings towards being drafted?

Wisovaty: I just didn't want to do it, but I wasn't going to not go along with it since it was part of the law. It just interrupted what I was doing at the time which I said wasn't very much.

Wijangco: You said you weren't not going to do it because it was part of the law. What were the consequences for those who didn't? What experiences do you have with those who didn't obey the draft like you did?

Wisovaty: It never occurred to me for example to go Canada to avoid going to Vietnam because I had no particular political consciousness. I obviously believed, growing up in the fifties, that everything the United States government did was correct, and everything the United States government told us to do was correct. Going over to the individuals who went to Canada to avoid the draft, my personal feeling is those young men who did that out of a sincere opposition to our invasion of Vietnam were absolute heroes. I mean my God, they gave up everything. They went to a foreign country. They didn't know if they'd ever be able to come back. They left their parents here to deal with that. I give them all the credit in the world. I doubt I would have had the courage to have done it I had had that political consciousness which I did not at that time.

Wijangco: What was it like for you to be drafted while maybe other people took different paths?

Wisovaty: I don't think that at the time I was drafted I had known anyone who had avoided the draft. I had known a few people, as I had suggested earlier, got into the Illinois National Guard to avoid being drafted which as I said was the purpose of the National Guard during the Vietnam War. I was a little resentful of that. My father having been a coal miner, and my mother having been a

telephone operator, neither one of them had an immense amount of political pull. So off I went to be drafted.

Wijangco: What were your general thoughts on the Vietnam War before you were even drafted?

Wisovaty: As I said, I grew in the fifties. I was raised on a diet of John Wayne and Randolph Scott movies, and everything the government did was correct. When the government told me that we were in Vietnam to save the Vietnamese people from the horrible tyrant Ho Chi Minh, I believed them. I didn't understand some of the things I came to understand later.

Ledford: What were some of those things and how did you come to understand them?

Wisovaty: Well, of course we were told that we went to Vietnam, and that the people of South Vietnam would be enormously appreciative of our presence there to save them Ho Chi Minh and the communists in North Vietnam. I didn't have a lot of conversations with the civilians, but I did notice two things. One, during the week I spent at a base camp, which is a very large well-fortified area, the only Vietnamese with whom I ever came into contact were the drug-dealers, and the bartenders, and the laundry people and some young ladies, not myself personally. In any case, all of those Vietnamese with whom you would come into contact at a base camp went out their way consistently to tell you how much they appreciated you being there to save them from Ho Chi Minh and the communists. I think a lot of soldiers who were stationed there for a long period of time failed to realize that the Vietnamese were telling them how

much they loved us because we were paying them to be nice to us. When I got out in the field because I was in an armored cavalry squadron which was in the field, we didn't deal with that many Vietnamese, but I'm reasonably confident that the ones who dealt with didn't really appreciate us being there and felt we were invading their country. You have to realize, and I didn't realize until I started to study this when I got out of the service, Ho Chi Minh was essentially the George Washington of Vietnam. He was in Paris in 1919 trying to get some legitimacy for his country. He of course wasn't able to do that. By the 1960s, he was a god-like figure. Even Dwight Eisenhower admitted that 80% of the people in Vietnam would have voted for Ho if free elections had been held in 1956.

Wijangco: Going back to the civilians you did get to encounter in that base camp. You said some people didn't realize they were saying how much they loved the American soldiers. They were saying that because they were being paid to say that. What were your thoughts? When did you realize that was the reason for it?

Wisovaty: I didn't spend that week in a base camp until I was getting ready to go back to the United States, so I had already had the experience of dealing with the Vietnamese in the field who did not appear to be that crazy about me. I was kind of overwhelmed by again, every Vietnamese I met in the base camp just fell all over him or herself to tell me how much they loved me. I thought well this doesn't make any sense. Then it dawned on me, yeah I just paid this lady for a drink and gave her a tip, of course she's going to say nice things to me.

My point is my guess is I guess if I had spent my entire tour in that base camp, I probably would have come home from Vietnam believing we had done something other than invade a foreign country.

Ledford: What caused that awakening if you will?

Wisovaty: Probably more than anything the Vietnamese with whom I dealt, there were not a lot, but the Vietnamese with whom we dealt out in the country in the field. We would be in an armored convoy, and we'd go through a village. The roads would be full of old men, old women and children. Not being a mind reader, it was pretty obvious they weren't throwing flowers at us. They did not appear to be that crazy about us. Then that kind of awakened me to the concept that maybe we shouldn't be there. When I got back to the United States, I begin to study a little bit about Vietnamese history. I think that cemented my feelings in that regard.

Wijangco: While you were in the military, you served in multiple locations in the U.S. and in Vietnam. What were your experiences in both of those countries as a soldier?

Wisovaty: When I got out of basic training, I was sent to radio telegraph school. I spent about eight weeks there. Then I was sent for about three months to radio teletype school. After that, I was sent to Fort Hood, Texas where they gave me a job changing flat tires in a motor pool. I just couldn't stand that, so I went in to the company clerk and said, "I can't do this for another 13 months. I've got to get out of here." He said, "If you want to get out of here, there's only one

place for which you can volunteer which will be accepted.” Obviously, that was Vietnam. I said, “I don’t care, sent me to Vietnam. I just want out of here.”

Wijangco: When you were drafted you didn’t originally want to be in the military, but then a few months later after being drafted you were working changing flat tires. You actually go and volunteer to go to the war. How would you describe that transition?

Wisovaty: The transition from Texas to Vietnam?

Wijangco: The transition from originally not wanting to go to war because you were being drafted, and then you kind of end up volunteering to go to Vietnam?

Wisovaty: It wasn’t so much that I didn’t want to go to war. I just didn’t want to be in the Army. Once I was in the Army and I was stuck with it, I had this deplorable job in Texas. I thought I’ve got to do something else. At least when they sent me to Vietnam, they made me a radio operator which was what I was originally trained to be.

Wijangco: For somebody who has no military knowledge or idea of what a radio operator is, how would you describe that to them?

Wisovaty: If one is a radio operator in the infantry, it’s an incredibly dangerous job. Fortunately, in the armored cavalry, which consisted of tanks and what were called armored personnel carriers, my job was rather stationary. I was in an armored personnel carrier. The line platoons, the men who actually went out

and got shot at much more than I did, I would keep in contact with them over the radio. When something happened, such as if they got into a fire fight and were ambushed, then usually an officer would take over because he knew more about what he was doing than I did. My job, despite the fact that it was in a field combat unit, was not overly dangerous.

Wijangco: As a radio operator, what is the most memorable experience you had during that job?

Wisovaty: I honestly don't recall anything particularly memorable. I did get a call when I first got there, and somebody said something about seeing an elephant. I assumed that that was a code name, and I asked the sergeant what an elephant was. He told me, and I said I just never believed I'd be anywhere where they had elephants. I don't have any particularly memorable stories for you about my job. I'm sorry.

Wijangco: You mentioned there was this one instance where you were working as a radio operator and it was night time. You thought that maybe there was possibly an enemy.

Wisovaty: I might have known you'd bring this up. I got a call from someone in the middle of the night who was on guard duty who indicated he thought that there was some enemy activity out beyond his perimeter. He wanted permission to open fire. I had just gotten there. I didn't know what to tell him. I asked the sergeant. The sergeant said, "Let me check." The sergeant came back a little later and said there was no enemy activity. One of the soldiers

was out there cavorting with a young Vietnamese lady. I couldn't say that on the radio. I just told the individual it's under control, don't worry about it.

When I got back to the University of Illinois, I was talking to a friend of mine who turned out to have been that very same soldier which was somewhat coincidental, but it's not a great war story.

Wijangco: So who exactly was this woman? What did you know about her?

Wisovaty: I never laid eyes on her. She was some young lady. You have to realize there was a lot of prostitution in Vietnam, but I don't call those women prostitutes. The reason I don't call them prostitutes is because we turned their society upside down. They did what they had to do to survive. Young boys, some teenage boys were selling drugs not because they wanted to become drug dealers but because they were trying to survive in a society that we were in the process of if not destroying, certainly dismantling.

Wijangco: Speaking of some Vietnamese civilians like you mentioned the women. Did you ever get to see the specific impacts the toll of the war had on them?

Wisovaty: I don't know if I can think of an example of something like that. I do recall one time a sergeant showed me something of which he was especially proud. It was a photograph of him holding a severed head of a Vietcong which I wasn't terribly impressed with, but he seemed to think it was clever.

Wijangco: What were your immediate reactions to seeing that photo?

Wisovaty: Given the fact that the Vietcong were the enemy, I can understand why he shot him, but I thought that decapitating him and posing for a photo was just horrible.

Wijangco: Do you ever think about that situation today?

Wisovaty: I hadn't really thought about it until you asked me about it Amanda, thank you. Thank you for bringing it up again. I'll probably be thinking about it now when I try to go to sleep tonight.

Wijangco: Do you know anyone of Vietnamese descent currently?

Wisovaty: I do not believe that I do.

Wijangco: Would you want to after being in the Vietnam War?

Wisovaty: I would like to know someone old enough to remember the war to talk to him or her about how they felt about it, yeah.

Ledford: Why? How would you imagine that conversation going?

Wisovaty: Realizing as I said that every Vietnamese had to deal with whatever he or she had to deal with to survive, a large number of the Vietnamese were part of the South Vietnamese government. The South Vietnamese government generally was a very corrupt organization filled with thugs and generals who didn't care about their own people, but a lot of Vietnamese worked for that government. This happens in any civil war. When you lose, you don't want to be on the losing side. I'm guessing a lot of those Vietnamese, who were on the losing

side not because they were evil people but because they worked for the South Vietnamese government, probably wound up emigrating to the United States, and I don't blame them. I would be rather curious to know how they felt about the war.

Wijangco: Since you were a radio operator, were you ever in combat?

Wisovaty: One time the North Vietnamese Army tried to overrun our position. I remember seeing North Vietnamese soldiers 30 or 40 yards from me firing. We kind of hunkered down. We started out with a rocket attack. A number of men in my unit went into a bunker to avoid the rockets or to get some shelter from them. Three of those men were killed when a North Vietnamese threw a satchel charge, which is essentially a hand grenade, into their bunker. I'm glad I didn't go to that bunker. We had a number of casualties in my unit. My communications lieutenant for whom I worked directly was killed when his Jeep hit a mine.

Wijangco: What was it like not necessarily being those people on the front lines but being just in the back sheltered?

Wisovaty: As I said, I was out in the field, but I was in a stationary, armored personal carrier because of my job. Yeah the individuals on the front lines as you put it, the line platoons that actually went out and ran convoys and sought out dangerous enemy activity, those guys were the real heroes. I make no claims to heroism myself, Amanda.

Ledford: Can you say that one more time please?

Wisovaty: I said I make no claims to heroism myself.

Wijangco: Even though you weren't as you said on the front lines, you still were participating in a war. Just word association. What comes to mind when I say war? How would you define that?

Wisovaty: How would I define war? That's kind of a broad question. Again, it largely depends on what you were doing and with whom you were serving. If you were in a base camp, you were spending most of your time changing tires and pounding a typewriter. If you were in an infantry unit, it was a whole different thing. As I've always said, there are two kinds of soldiers in every war: the infantry and everyone else. The infantry had by far the most difficult job. All the combat arms did, but the infantry was much worse. If they had put me in an infantry unit as a radio operator, my chances of survival would have been considerably lessened.

Ledford: Was that just a lucky draw that you didn't get in the infantry?

Wisovaty: I was standing in line about two o'clock in the morning shortly after I got to Vietnam waiting to be assigned to a unit. I finally got up there, and the corporal said what's your MOS, meaning what were you trained to do. I was not going to use the word radio. That word was not going to come out of my mouth. I said I'm a telegraph teletype operator. He had no idea what that meant. The lieutenant came up and said "what's the problem, why isn't this

man assigned?" The corporal said "he's a teletype telegraph operator and I have no idea what that is." The lieutenant said "telegraph, hell he's a radio operator, put him in the cav." My knees turned to water because I knew it was a combat unit, but as I say I was fortunate.

Wijangco: Why did you not want to use the word radio?

Wisovaty: Because I thought they might put me in a combat unit.

Wijangco: War can be described as kill or be killed, survival of the fittest. Does that match your description?

Wisovaty: Yeah, if someone is shooting at you, obviously you're going to shoot back. The main job that everyone had in Vietnam, and this is probably true in any war scenario, was to cover your buddy and have your buddy cover you. It wasn't in our minds to free the Vietnamese. It wasn't to defeat the communists. Every day when we got out there it was I'm going to take care of the guy on my left, and he's going to take care of me. The same with the guy on my right. Plus, in Vietnam you were only there for a certain amount of time for a tour, so you had a short-timer's calendar. When everybody got up every morning, they knew they had one less day to go. It was kind of a battle between you and the calendar also.

Wijangco: Who exactly did you view as the enemy?

Wisovaty: Obviously anybody who was trying to kill me was the enemy. Even though I came to appreciate the fact that the Vietnamese really didn't want us there,

obviously the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army were still enemy combatants who could kill us. When I got back to this country and I looked into the history of Vietnam a little more, I realized in my mind that I was on the wrong side. That's my opinion only.

Ledford: So as far as the enemy goes, we've also had people say the enemy was the weather or the boredom. You mentioned the calendar. Was the calendar your friend or was it your enemy? Tell us about that and why.

Wisovaty: Well the calendar was certainly something that told you how many days you had left or how many weeks or months you had left in Vietnam. In my case, I was only there for six months. The reason being when I volunteered for Vietnam, I had thirteen months left. I was told it would take thirty days to get special orders, and I'd wind up being there about eleven months. Since the Army is part of the United States government, it failed in getting the special orders to me. By the time I got to Vietnam, I only had six months left. Yeah, you looked at that calendar and would think, "Ok. Here's one more day I can cross off until I get to go home." Or as we called 'until I go back to the world'.

Ledford: Can you explain that phrase please? Say that phrase again and explain it.

Wisovaty: Back to the world? Yeah, that's what we referred to the United States as, the world, as opposed to the place we were. It almost suggests that we were dehumanizing Vietnam, and I supposed to an extent we were. We referred to

the United States as the world. We're going back to the world. That's what we called it.

Wijangco: Why do you think it was decided that you would call the United States the world as opposed to simply the United States or home?

Wisovaty: As opposed to Vietnam. I'm sorry what was the question?

Wijangco: Why would you think you would call the United States going back to the world as opposed to going back to the United States?

Wisovaty: I don't know. That's what we called it. I have no idea. It's a rather strange designation. I really don't know, but that's what everyone in Vietnam called it. We would say we were going back to the world meaning we were going home. It does seem rather odd, but that's what they called it.

Wijangco: What do you think that suggests about America at the time?

Wisovaty: It just suggests that we wanted to be there. We really wanted to be there.

Wijangco: Since you were a radio operator and you didn't really experience much combat, did you have possession of any weapons?

Wisovaty: Oh yeah, you never went anywhere in Vietnam without carrying a M16.

Wijangco: Did you ever have to actually use it?

Wisovaty: No. One time I did pin down a platoon of our soldiers because I was at a firing range. I didn't realize there was some of our soldiers on the other side of the firing range, but I can honestly say I never had to fire a shot in anger.

Wijangco: Even though you didn't have to shoot the gun, what was it like just to carry it as a young man?

Wisovaty: Well, you know that if by some chance you happen to be in a situation such that we were in a convoy, and we were attacked. Obviously, you would be expected to shoot back. I'm certain I would have done that had it happened.

Ledford: Could you just say that again about why you carried a weapon?

Wisovaty: I carried a M16 everywhere I went because everyone, at least in the field, carried his weapon everywhere he went. We were allowed to carry whatever we wanted. If we wanted to carry an AK-47 which is a Russian-made army the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong used, we were allowed to carry that. You never went anywhere without a weapon. What I said was I never actually had to fire one in anger. I'm certain if I had been shot at I would have. I'm just thankful that I didn't.

Wijangco: What was it like seeing the enemy shoot at your fellow comrades especially while you weren't necessarily one who was up in the front lines?

Wisovaty: Well, I did have a few acquaintances who were killed as I suggested. When our lieutenant got killed when his Jeep hit a mine, another enlisted man was killed, and the chaplain was also in the Jeep, but he was hardly injured at all.

The next morning, we had a ceremony in the field. We played taps. That was pretty heavy.

Ledford: Do you mind describing that ceremony?

Wisovaty: To the best of my recollection, of course the chaplain was part of it for the reason he was a chaplain. He was also a part of it because he was in the Jeep when it hit a mine. He came incredibly close to being killed himself. We had to wonder why the chaplain wasn't hurt and the other two soldiers were killed, but that's a philosophical, theological matter. They played taps. The commanding officer said something. What's incredible about it is that you're having a ceremony mourning the death of people with whom you spoke twelve hours or twenty-four hours earlier. When I participate in a funeral ceremony at the Tuscola cemetery, and I assist with those in a firing squad in my capacity with the veteran's organization, every time I hear taps I still think of that occasion in Vietnam when we were having a service for someone with whom I had spoken with twelve hours earlier. It was pretty heavy.

Wijangco: As a radio operator, how exactly did you hear about say that Jeep mine incident? Were you one of the first people to know as a radio operator?

Wisovaty: I don't recall being on duty at the time that it happened. I honestly don't. I'm guessing I wasn't or I would recall that.

Wijangco: Then how would you normally hear about the incidents of deaths and other things like that?

Wisovaty: Well, that kind of news travels pretty quickly when somebody gets killed.

Wijangco: Just by word of mouth?

Wisovaty: Yes.

Wijangco: How long exactly were you in Vietnam?

Wisovaty: I was only there for six months because I only had six months left in the service when I got there. I was given a re-enlistment talk about two weeks before my tour I ended. I thought that I've got two choices. I can re-enlist and spend six more months in Vietnam or I can go back to Urbana and try to talk them into admitting me. I chose option B.

Wijangco: What was it like coming back home?

Wisovaty: What really struck me was going from a place that was very tumultuous and very dangerous and very noisy. I'd be walking down the quad, and all the students would be playing Frisbee with their dog. I wanted to grab them and say, "Don't you realize there's a damn war going on?" Even when we had some anti-war activity on campus, and we did have some, to my recollection it was a minority of the students who actually seemed to care about it which rather disappointed me.

Wijangco: You said there was some anti-war activity at the University of Illinois campus. Can you describe some of that?

Wisovaty: Yeah, there was some. I know we had the entire Illinois National Guard here about six weeks before Kent State which I believe was in 1970. But to indicate how conservative this campus was, I later joined an organization called Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In speaking with a friend of mine who is a national officer, I said, "I'm kind of embarrassed I never joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War when I was in school at the University of Illinois." His response was, "We didn't have a chapter here, Paul." This wasn't Berkeley or Madison. It was a pretty conservative school.

Wijangco: Just to go back to that anti-war activity that was here, what exactly was going on? How would you describe that?

Wisovaty: Oh we got to march in the July 4th parade. Of course, the police were walking on either side of us to make sure we didn't do anything illegal or disruptive. A lot of it was probably like Kent State except nobody got killed. We'd have the National Guard here. To tell you the truth Amanda, it's been so long ago I don't remember a lot of the specifics, but I know we had some demonstrations and some speakers who would come and talk about the war and why we should not be in the war. It's been a long time.

Ledford: Can you just explain the parade?

Wisovaty: Well, actually I'm sorry that was not during the Vietnam War. That was during the Iraq War. I'm sorry. You're right, thank you. There was an Iraq War Veterans Against the War chapter here, and then us old guys in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War chapter. We did march in the parade. I

remember the mayor, whose name I don't want to recall, was walking around next to us wearing a helmet and carrying a billy club in case one of us said something inappropriate I guess. That was during the Iraq War. I'm sorry.

Ledford: What was the anti-war movement like back in the day after you came back to college? Can you just say again where you ended up in college?

Wisovaty: I got back from Vietnam on June 2, 1968, and two weeks later I enrolled in college here at the University of Illinois. Most of the anti-war activity was probably the three times or so when I went out to Washington D.C. where there were obviously a lot more people. Those events were very well attended, especially as we got into the seventies. What you saw as the war became less popular and more people got involved in the anti-war movement, it wasn't just the so-called hippies. There were a lot like middle-aged housewives. People who several years earlier or a few years earlier would have never even considered doing something like that. That's when I think we knew that we were going to win because we were getting the broad spectrum or much of the broad spectrum of the American public involved with those antiwar sentiments. Of course, most importantly we got Walter Cronkite on our side. LBJ admitted he'd lost when that happened.

Ledford: So you mentioned you went to Washington D.C. a few times. Why exactly did you go there?

Wisovaty: Because there were anti-war demonstrations planned. Yeah, there was a lot that going on in Washington D.C. during the war and in many places across

the country. When Richard Nixon was president, of course the White House was a favorite place we liked to target. Although, you couldn't get within several football fields of the White House for obvious security reasons. Actually in the 1971 anti-war demonstration, I remember we were all given something to wear around our necks with the name of an American who had been killed in Vietnam. We were told that when we went by the White House we were to call out the name of that deceased veteran in the direction of the White House. Howey Betterfield was the veteran, I still remember that, whose name I wore around my neck. I yelled his name very loudly at President Nixon who I'm sure was not paying much attention. He was probably just having a scotch.

Wijangco: What was it like putting that man's name around your neck especially since you were a veteran and you did know people who died?

Wisovaty: Oh yeah, it was real heavy. Like I say, it's been 40 some years ago, and I still remember his name. Yeah, it was heavy.

Wijangco: Tell me about your relationship with your fellow veterans and your shared experiences in the war together.

Wisovaty: As I'd said earlier, our main job was to cover each other and take care of each other. My two best friends from Vietnam both live in Michigan. Three years ago I realized I had not seen them or talked to them in forty years. One day I got a call from one of them, and we got together. This last October was the third consecutive year that we've gotten together. Needless to say at our

advanced ages, we're not going to do it every five years. We're going to do it every year. It was wonderful to see them, and the best thing about that first year when I had not seen them for forty years is I thought, "Ok, what are we going to talk about? Are we going to talk about the weather? Are we going to talk about the Chicago Bears? Is it going to be difficult?" It was like we'd seen each other a month ago. It was just wonderful. It was like we'd just parted.

Wijangco: What was it like getting that phone call after forty-some years? How did you feel?

Wisovaty: Oh I couldn't believe it. My daughter came out on the porch and said, "Dad, you've got a phone call from Rusty." I'd only known two Rustys in my life. I had a dog named Rusty, who I discounted, and Rusty Hammond who I served with in Vietnam. I said, "My god Rusty, I haven't talked to you in forty years. How are you doing?" One thing led to another and we decided to get together. The two of us and our third friend Allen Bocker in Michigan. We've done it for the last three years, and I look forward to continuing to do it.

Ledford: How did you know those guys in Vietnam and what did you do together?
What was it that made you friends?

Wisovaty: Al was a radio repairman, and of course I was a radio operator. I saw something of him in the context of our equipment. I don't remember what Rusty did. I honestly don't remember. I remember he was crazy as a loon which is part of the reason I loved him. You make friends in a lot of scenarios

whether its college or it's in a war zone. You meet people, some of them you're attracted to more or less than others. Al, and Rusty, and I were just. As one of them put it we weren't Army buddies; we were friends.

Ledford: What's the difference between those two?

Wisovaty: Oh I think there's a big difference. An Army buddy is just somebody you had a few experiences with and had a few beers with. A friend is like a friend. I think it's a step higher.

Wijangco: What is it like having those two people not as your Army buddies as you mentioned but as your friends still to this day?

Wisovaty: I look forward to going back there in October. One of them isn't in the best of health, but he seems to be doing ok. I seem to be hanging in there better than I should expect to be. Rusty seems to be doing ok. It's something I'm looking forward to again in October. I look forward to seeing them for the fourth consecutive year and telling the same stories that are somewhat embellished and only half-correctly remembered of course, but that doesn't matter. They are still good stories.

Wijangco: You say they're half correctly remembered. Is that just due to..?

Wisovaty: 47 years, yeah, and age, but we do the best we can.

Ledford: Let's hear one or two of those stories.

Wisovaty: Well, the story I had written an article about I included the story when the company commander, the troop commander, was getting ready to send one of our line platoons the wrong way down a road which of course could have gotten them killed if the mistake hadn't been noticed. The true story is I had written down the wrong road when he had given me the directions, and I almost sent a platoon down the wrong road which could have gotten them killed. Thank god somebody noticed it. Yeah, simple mistakes can be very costly. Then of course there was a story about my friend at the U of I who was out at the perimeter, but that doesn't need to be gone into again. Just a lot of the conversation, a lot of the bonding, which was pretty intense because you knew you might not see that person the next day. It wasn't just like having a college roommate who you know you were going to see.

Wijangco: You said you didn't know if you were necessarily going to see them the next day. How much does it mean to you that you have been able to see two of them 47 years after and still get to keep in touch with them?

Wisovaty: Oh, it means a lot. Interestingly, a third individual with whom I served called me a year ago. He'd been on the Internet, and he was reading some article I'd written in a veteran's paper. All of a sudden, he came across his own name. He didn't remember me. He only remembered one other person because he had some serious Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but all of a sudden he saw his name in this article. He called the publisher and said I need to get in touch with this Wisovaty guy. He called me, and we had a very nice conversation.

He lives in California. I have not been able to see him, but it was wonderful to touch base with him again.

Wijangco: You have mentioned that you do write articles. You write about your experiences in the war. How did that come to be?

Wisovaty: Vietnam Veterans Against the War has a semi-annual thirty-page newspaper called *The Veteran*. I've had a column in it for probably fifteen years. The last column I wrote was about sexual abuse in the military. I wrote one about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder about a year ago. About a year and a half ago or two years ago, I wrote one about my reunion about which we've spoken. The last article I wrote which was a few months ago was about teaching Vietnam because for the last twenty years I've gone to the high school at Tuscola and talked to classes about the Vietnam War. I've probably talked to 75 to 100 classes in the last 18 or 20 years. They keep inviting me back. They don't pay very well, but they keep inviting me back. Actually they don't pay at all.

Wijangco: What are some of your most memorable stories that you've written for that paper?

Wisovaty: You think since I've been doing it for 15 years I'd remember. The last several I do recall. In 2003 when we invaded Iraq, I wrote a column saying no, this isn't a good idea. This isn't the right thing to do. Ten years later on the tenth anniversary of the war, I wrote a column kind of looking back at what I'd written ten years earlier trying to figure out what I'd gotten right and what I'd gotten wrong.

Wijangco: You mentioned the public speaking you do for the Tuscola High School students. What exactly do you tell them? Why do you do that?

Wisovaty: One thing I do not do is lecture to them. I have no skills as an educator. I'm a lousy lecturer. I talk to them for about four minutes about what I did in the Army and what I've done since, and then I just let them ask questions. I've told the teachers make sure they have questions. It starts out kind of slowly. They don't have any idea who I am. They just know I'm some old guy, and they don't want to ask a question and have me bite their head off. Eventually when they realize I'm just there to try to help, they start asking questions. Most of the questions are like did it ever rain? How big were the elephants? What did you have to eat? Did you get much mail? Those sorts of things. Then they'd get into what did you do in Vietnam? Where were you stationed? And usually someone will say did you think that the war was a just war? I start by saying you have to remember it was during the Cold War. The entire purpose of the United States in foreign policy at that time was what was called containment, meaning let's keep communism from expanding anywhere where it's not already. The problem with that was as this government saw the world, there were only two kinds of countries: communist countries and non-communist countries. All the communist countries were bad, and all the non-communist countries were good. What we failed to notice or failed to care about as a government, as a nation, was even though the South Vietnamese government was non-communist, it wasn't a good government. The people

that lived there didn't want it, but I tell them it's easy to look back fifty years and say that. It might not have been as easy to say it at the time.

Wijangco: How exactly did the Tuscola High School speaking come to be? How did that happen?

Wisovaty: It's been twenty years ago. I think I was probably having a conversation one day with one of the teachers in some context. Whether it was in a restaurant, I don't recall. She just said, "Hey, would you like to come talk to my class about Vietnam." I said sure. They've had a few different teachers since that time. They keep inviting me back, so it's fun.

Wijangco: You speak to high school students, so they're not much younger you were when you were drafted. What kind of differences do you see between the teenagers that you're talking to and teenagers like you who were drafted?

Wisovaty: I don't actually get to talk to them that much. I mean I answer their questions as best I can, but I don't really sit and have conversations of any length with them. The only teenagers with whom I've ever had multiple conversations were those whom I supervised when I was a probation officer, but they probably weren't typical of the average juvenile. I did not get to know the students that well. I just answered their questions and thanked them and left. I know they know how to use computers which I don't, so they're way ahead of me.

Wijangco: Do any of the students ever ask about the draft since they are around that age that you were when you were drafted?

Wisovaty: I believe 18-year olds have to register for the draft, but of course there hasn't been a draft in some years. I'm guessing since the early seventies. I'm not sure. It doesn't seem to cross their minds.

Wijangco: Can you go back to why you like to keep coming back and answering children's questions?

Wisovaty: Why I like what? I'm sorry.

Wijangco: Why you like to keep going back?

Wisovaty: They always have interesting questions. As I say they range from philosophical or historical questions to questions like did you see a lot of spiders? My way of looking at it is there is no such thing as a stupid question. Sometimes I kind of wonder about the questions, but I try to do the best job of giving them the best and most serious answer I can. As I say once they realize that I'm not there to bully them or threaten them or something, a lot of hands start going up, and they have a lot of questions. Apparently, it's working well. It's just enjoyable. It wears me out, but it's enjoyable.

Wijangco: How important do you think answering these teenagers' questions about the war is?

Wisovaty: Well, they're studying Vietnam at the time, and of course they are different ways to look at Vietnam. One is that we invaded a foreign country, and the other is the opposite which is that we were trying to contain communism and protect the people of South Vietnam. I tell them, "I'm going to tell you how I feel, but you're obviously entitled to your own opinion on the subject. Study it." The Tuscola High School history book actually does a very good job. It presents both sides to the argument. I'm very happy to see that it does that. I just try to add something to the other resources that they have to learn about the war.

Wijangco: How often do you do this again?

Wisovaty: I've been doing it for about twenty years. For some reason, they don't teach Vietnam every year. I don't know why. In the last twenty years, I've probably been there 13 to 15 of those years. The years when I go, I talk to about five classes, so I've talked to close to a hundred classes in that amount of time. The last time I went was last spring, so I'm hoping to be invited back this spring.

Wijangco: What are your thoughts on how you said they don't appear to teach Vietnam every year? What are your thoughts on that?

Wisovaty: I don't really know how their curriculum is structured. I honestly don't know the answer because I didn't really ask them. I just know they don't teach it every year. I'm guessing some years they only go up to the Civil War or they only go up to World War II. I really don't know.

Wijangco: Going back to Vietnam, in a geographic sense where were you located when you were there?

Wisovaty: South Vietnam is divided into four parts called, it would be too simple to call them one, two, three, and four, so the army called them I [Corps], II [Corps], III [Corps] and IV [Corps]. Four was Mekong Delta where Forest Gump was, and that's where most of my unit of the ninth infantry division was stationed. However, since we were tanks and armored personnel carriers, we would not have done well in the swamps, so we were stationed mostly in I Corps which was quite far North near the demilitarized zone, rather close to North Vietnam. That countryside was pretty much flat and quite dry. It was suitable for armored activity.

Wijangco: In terms of that immediate environment, as a radio operator, where exactly were you?

Wisovaty: Well, of course I was in an armored personnel carrier. When we were a little further south, there were more trees. I don't know that you would call them jungles. It's been some years. When we were up north in the flat and more open country, you could certainly see a lot further which made you feel a little safer because there wasn't that much shrubbery or forest to block your view. It kind of looked a lot like Texas.

Wijangco: Who did you usually get calls from as a radio operator?

Wisovaty: I would coordinate activity with the line platoons when they were out doing what they were doing. I spent a lot of time ordering various items that we needed, Whiskey Papa which was white phosphorous which was something like Agent Orange or Napalm. Just things that the troop needed to continue. I don't remember too many specifics about that, but I would order them from somewhere, and they would send them.

Wijangco: What kind of calls would you receive?

Wisovaty: I would get calls usually in answer to my requests for assistance. I'm sorry it's really just been so long. I really don't remember the specifics of that.

Ledford: You said of course I was in an armored personnel carrier. Can you go on the assumption that Amanda has no idea that you were in an armored company and/or what an armored personnel carrier even is? Start with that and then describe what was inside there.

Wisovaty: I was stationed most of the time in an armored personnel carrier which is slightly smaller than a tank, but as the name suggests it had a whole lot of armor and a whole lot of metal to protect it which was why it was called an armored personnel carrier. It was called a personnel carrier because it was used to transport personnel. If however we were attacked at a convoy, we didn't ride inside it because if you got hit by a rocket-propelled grenade which would actually pierce the armor, you didn't want to be inside it when it blew up. The only people riding inside the armored personnel carrier were the actual drivers. The rest of us rode on top, so if we got hit by a rocket-propelled

grenade we would bounce off or jump off as opposed to being inside and being blown up.

Wijangco: You just said you rode on top. What was that like?

Wisovaty: Oh, it was fun! You're on top of this APC, this armored personnel carrier, and you feel like John Wayne. You're carrying your weapon, and you're feeling really cool until you look back at the Vietnamese and you realize they don't think you're so cool.

Ledford: Were you afraid of getting shot by a bullet when you weren't in the thing? Was that sort of a trade-off in other words? Was there a trade-off between being inside and being outside?

Wisovaty: You didn't want to be inside because if a rocket-propelled grenade could pierce that armor, so you didn't want to be in there because the whole thing would blow up. If they thing blew up and you got hit, but you were on top of it, you were more likely to be able to jump free.

Ledford: What about a bullet though?

Wisovaty: A bullet wouldn't go through it.

Ledford: Well, you're on top of it. Aren't you more exposed?

Wisovaty: Yes, you're more exposed to bullets. You are quite correct. Fortunately, when we were up north, and I said the terrain reminded me somewhat of Texas, we didn't have the forested areas which means you were much less likely to be

ambushed from very close quarters. You could see far enough that if there was anyone out there who might want to do you harm, you could see them from some distance. Down where it was more forested areas or certainly down in the Mekong Delta which was a swamp, you could be very close to the enemy and you wouldn't know it until it was too late, but I wasn't down there so I can't speak from experience.

Wijangco: Things like drugs and prostitution and sex slavery were things that were part of the Vietnam War in that area. They are actually still present today in the U.S. How do you see those two differently?

Wisovaty: We're talking about drugs and prostitution?

Wijangco: Yes, and the sex trade.

Wisovaty: As I said earlier, I don't even call the women prostitutes because they were doing what they had to do to survive in an abnormal situation. As far as drugs went, there was quite a bit of marijuana consumed in the field, and it was very readily available. I'm told in the larger places, the base camps and the cities, there was quite a bit of so-called hard drugs, cocaine, heroin, things of that nature, but I was never stationed there so I never saw it. Most of the guys in my field unit who chose to use anything smoked marijuana. There wasn't that big of demand for beer. For some reason it wasn't that popular. Possibly because it was served at room temperature, and room temperature was 120 degrees. Ok, well 110 degrees. There was a lot of drug abuse in Vietnam. Obviously, the military knew that many of our soldiers, sailors, marines and

so forth were using illegal drugs. They had to know it. If they had done drug testing, we would have been out of Vietnam five to ten years earlier because it was illegal to use illegal drugs. It was very common. The only bad part about it I think is that a lot of the guys, particularly the ones in cities who got into the more hard drugs, probably developed some addictions which they brought back with them to this country which certainly caused them problems when they got back.

Wijangco: How do you see the drug use and the sort of prostitution and the sex acts that happened in Vietnam compared to the ones that are happening today?

Wisovaty: Having been a probation officer for 35 years, you'd think I'd know a lot more about sex acts and drugs than I do. In this country certainly drug abuse is a problem. It's also quite criminal. Except in Colorado and Washington, it's illegal to possess any amount of marijuana. My guess is that down the road we will see some legalization of marijuana. When I would be talking to someone on probation about marijuana use, I would say if we are having a philosophical conversation about marijuana I will agree with you that it's probably less harmful than alcohol. However, we aren't having a philosophical conversation. I'm being overpaid to be your probation officer, so we're going to go to the bathroom, and we're going to do a pee test. I think alcohol is actually much more dangerous than marijuana because, speaking as a probation officer, the majority of individuals whom I got on probation for having committed criminal offenses did it when they were drunk and not when they were stoned. Nobody ever got stoned and held up a liquor store or

beat somebody up. Again, the judge never asked my opinion, so I never gave it to him.

Wijangco: So connecting those two, how do you see those two differently exactly?

Wisovaty: How do I see drugs and prostitution differently back here than in Vietnam?

Ledford: Specifically, how did you see it back there?

Wisovaty: There wasn't much prostitution where I was because I was out in the field. We didn't deal with many Vietnamese. There was much more of a problem in urban areas or in the base camps. As far as the marijuana and the drug abuse, as I said marijuana was quite readily available out in the field. The so-called hard drugs were not readily available.

Ledford: We had a great quote from you about the beer being 120 degrees. My trusty B camera person laughed out loud which we probably have on audio. Could you tell that story one more time please?

Wisovaty: Beer wasn't as popular in the field in my unit as marijuana. One of the reasons I suspect is the beer was always consumed at room temperature, and room temperature in Vietnam in the field since we didn't have any buildings was somewhere between 100 and 110 degrees during the day. It did get somewhat cooler at night, but it didn't help much.

Wijangco: You've mentioned there's an anti-war group that you're a part of. You've mentioned it several times. What is that group?

Wisovaty: It's Vietnam Veterans Against the War. They've continued.

Ledford: I'm sorry. It's like a three part question coming up.

Wijangco: So what is that anti-war group that you're a part of?

Wisovaty: It's called Vietnam Veterans Against the War. It sounds very anachronistic since the Vietnam War ended 40 years ago, but it still exists.

Wijangco: How did you become a part of that?

Wisovaty: As I said, VVAW did not have a chapter on the University of Illinois campus during the war while I attended school here. I honestly don't remember how I ran into somebody who was a part of it, but it was probably about 20 or 25 years ago. I honestly don't remember. Of course when we invaded Iraq, there became an organization called Iraq Veterans Against the War. We had some similarities. We obviously opposed the twin invasions of Iraq and Vietnam, and Vietnam Veterans Against the War became active in supporting the Iraq Veterans Against the War and in pushing for us to get out of Iraq which we felt we had not invaded appropriately, reasonably or justifiably.

Wijangco: When did you become a part of it?

Wisovaty: From the beginning, the Iraq invasion was in 2003 I believe. Vietnam Veterans Against the War was pretty much opposed to it from the start. Obviously there were no weapons of mass destruction. They never found any. Theoretically we went over there to I guess get rid of Saddam Hussein which I

guess we did do, and I'm not an expert on the Middle East by any stretch of the imagination. What we failed to realize or to care about was Iraq was an artificial country which was created in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference. Primarily, for the benefit of England and France, so they could decide what their spheres of influence and spheres of oil retention would be. Of course the country specifically of Iraq contained Kurds, Shia, Sunni, a lot of people who had really never been in a country together and probably were unlikely to ever become a stable one.

Wijangco: There was an anti-war group that you were a part of. What is that group?
When did you join it? Why?

Wisovaty: I joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War probably about 20 or 25 years ago. I don't remember how I became acquainted with it, but I became acquainted with someone who was involved in it, and I became involved in it at that time. Even though the Vietnam War was over, there was still fighting for things like veterans' rights which most veterans' organizations fight for. They were fighting for recognition on the part of the military and the defense department of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Something for example the military denied the existence of for some time, so it wouldn't have to pay benefits and things of that nature which appealed to me.

Wijangco: What are some of the activities that the group does?

Wisovaty: There is a chapter in Champaign, but it's quite small. Most of the members of VVAW are around the country or in Chicago. I've been to a few of the

reunions. I went to a few of the anti-war demonstrations during the Iraq War. I don't really work that closely with them to be able to tell you. I know the issues in which they are involved such as trying to get, a lot of soldiers got less than honorable discharges for reasons that were probably not legitimate because of their PTSD which wasn't properly diagnosed or because of their PTSD they got into some trouble that caused them to have bad discharges. That's just one of the examples of things that VVAW is working to try to correct.

Wijangco: Do you know any other issues?

Wisovaty: There's probably several, but I can't come up with them off the top of my head. I'm sorry.

Wijangco: You mentioned earlier that when you go to talk to these Tuscola High School students and answer their questions, there is a four-minute story you tell them just to inform them about the war. What is that story? Can you tell us?

Wisovaty: I just tell them I'm not going to lecture them. I'm going to tell them briefly what I did in the service, and I'm going to tell them briefly what I did when I got out of the service so they have some idea of who I am. I usually end that four or five minutes by saying that's more about me than you really need to know, but I figured you had the right to know something about why I'm here and what I've been doing for the last x number of years. Then I throw it open to questions because if I try to lecture them, first of all I'm a lousy lecturer. Secondly, I'm probably talking about things in which they have no interest,

and I'm not talking about things in which they are interested. It's really important that they ask me questions because then I'm talking about things in which they're interested. Although, I can usually find a way to turn any question into something I want it to be.

Wijangco: Act as if we were the students. Tell us that story you tell them specifically.

Wisovaty: I just say I'm going to say very briefly a little bit about me because you have a right to know that. I was born in Taylorville. I went to high school there. I was drafted in the Army in 1966. In 1967, I went to Vietnam. I got out of Vietnam in June of 1968 after having served as a radio operator in an armored cavalry unit. I enrolled in the University of Illinois. I was there until 1973 when I graduated with a degree in history and political science. For a few years I worked some odd jobs. Then in 1979, I became a probation officer in Champaign County. I served as a probation officer here in Douglas County until I retired two years ago. That's all about me you need to know, and probably more. Now let's go to questions please. They're pretty good about asking questions. As I said, talking about things in which they're interested and not just talking about things in which I'm interested.

Wijangco: What exactly do you do now? How has your current life been shaped by the Vietnam War?

Wisovaty: My current life was somewhat formed or influenced by the Vietnam War experience because it taught me that contrary to what I was led to believe when I was growing up in the 1950s, not everything about the United States

government is true and not everything it does is appropriate and virtuous. That doesn't mean that I am cynical, and I don't believe anything that political people say. That doesn't mean I'm anti-American. That doesn't mean any of those things. It means that I, just like you students, have a right and a responsibility when somebody tells you to do something to say, "Ok, why should I do it?" I wouldn't try it with your teacher. You won't get too far, but when someone else in authority says here's what you should do you have a right to say "Why?". It doesn't mean you're not going to do it. It doesn't mean there aren't negative repercussions if you fail to do it, especially if it's a police officer or a judge or something. You have a right to have anybody in authority explain to you the legitimacy of their request or their order.

Wijangco: How does that opinion differ from what you thought about the war originally?

Wisovaty: Originally, I assumed the war was correct. In fact, the government was telling me the truth when they said we were going over there to save the people of South Vietnam from Ho Chi Minh and the communists. Also growing up in the fifties and early sixties, communism was a very very bad thing. I'm not crazy about it now. I'm not a communist. I'm just saying we grew during the Cold War. We were told incessantly from everyone from our grade school teachers to the mayor that communism was an evil thing, and we have to combat it any way we can. If that included invading a foreign country that didn't want us there, ok that included that too.

Wijangco: What exactly did you think was the cause you were fighting for?

Wisovaty: I thought I was over there to contain the spread of communism from a communist country to a non-communist country despite the fact that Vietnam had been one country for many years. I was told that I was there to save the Vietnamese people. Of course when the French were kicked out in 1954, there was a Geneva Convention which called for free elections in Vietnam in 1956 which the United States was largely responsible for prohibiting it taking place. One of the reason was we knew, as Dwight Eisenhower admitted, that Ho Chi Minh would have won the vote easily. He would have won probably 80% of the vote which meant the country would have gone communist. That was a very bad thing in the 1950s.

Wijangco: Looking back on the war now, what do you think you were actually fighting for?

Wisovaty: To deny the people of Vietnam the right to be unified under a government that they preferred. Again I'm not saying the communist government of Vietnam now is a perfect government. I'm not saying it's anywhere near a democratic republic. I'm just saying it's the government the people of Vietnam wanted, and we prohibited them from having it.

Wijangco: What is your opinion on how the war ended?

Ledford: And how has that evolved over the years?

Wisovaty: Well, I remember being in a political science class in 1973, my last year in school when someone turned on the radio and the North Vietnamese were

entering the south and moving southward so quickly, as someone put it, they might of well have been on roller skates. The entire government of South Vietnam was collapsing without American support. That should not have been a surprise because the government of South Vietnam was never terribly popular with the people who lived there anyway. Most of the soldiers of the ARVN which was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, meaning South Vietnam, were drafted. Most of them didn't want to be there. Most of them, not all of them of course, but most of them I'm sure did not support the government in which they were fighting. We weren't the least bit surprised when after we pulled out, the North Vietnamese were able to defeat the South Vietnamese and unify the country. I think that's what should have happened. Again, I'm not defending communism in Vietnam or anywhere else. That's not my point. It's a matter of self-determination. I believe that's the issue that we were opposing by our presence.

Ledford: Can I throw in a couple of things? You told us off camera earlier that you're involved in some other veterans' groups now. What groups are you involved in? How do you spend your time?

Wisovaty: I'm what's called quartermaster of the Tuscola Veterans of Foreign Wars. Quartermaster is a word meaning treasurer. Since we have very few members and almost no money, it's not very difficult for me to be the treasurer because like I say we don't have much money. We do some legitimate things. We, in conjunction with the American Legion, frequently perform at funerals. We perform firing squad at funerals when a deceased veteran's family requests it.

We're in charge of Memorial Day services every year at the cemetery that rotates between the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign, and the Polish Legion of American Veterans of which I'm the current commander. We march in parades. We wave to people. All of the organizations have what's essentially called a relief fund which means when we sell poppies for donations, the people you see standing on street corners with these little plastic poppies, that money can only be spent for relief for veterans or veterans' families. We take that very seriously. We don't go out and buy beer with it or anything. Frequently, a veteran or a veteran's widow or something of that nature will need some help. Depending on how much money we got and within the limits that are imposed upon us by our lack of resources, we do the best we can to try and help them out legitimately.

Ledford: What do you mean the poppies? I don't understand what that is. Can you explain what that is about?

Wisovaty: There's an old poem, In Flanders fields the poppies grow. Among the crosses, row on row..”

Ledford: Recite that poem slower please.

Wisovaty: I only know the first couple of lines. It's a post-World War I poem. “In Flanders fields the poppies grow. Between the crosses, row on row.” I don't remember the rest of it. Somewhat of a contrast between the World War I battlefield looked like for four years and what it looked like when the war ended and flowers got to grow there. Veterans' organizations for about a

hundred years have been raising funds to help other veterans or their families by standing on a street corner with these poppies. People will drive by and we'll say, "Ma'am, I'm with the VFW. We're raising some money to help needy veterans." Of course, the donations are optional. If somebody wants to give me twenty cents I thank them profusely. With our Polish legion, all of the money that we raise with our poppy sales and pancake breakfast and fish fries is used for scholarships at Tuscola High School for veterans' children. The last two years we've given 1500 dollars in scholarships each of those two years which isn't bad considering we only have eight members.

Ledford: I have two questions. One is easy. One is difficult. The easy one first. I'm still not clear on what this vehicle was. Was it only a radio in there? Were you carrying a radio on your backpack?

Wisovaty: There was a large radio system. I don't remember what it was called. It had some sort of nickname that was set up inside the armored personnel carrier. I would use that to speak with either the line platoons or I might be speaking with a higher level than my company which is actually called a troop. I might be ordering supplies. I might be taking orders from someone to do something. It's been so long, I don't remember the specific communications. I'm sorry.

Ledford: That just gave me a visual that I didn't really have before.

Wisovaty: Yeah, it was a rather crowded place. If you more than three or four people in it, or four to five people in it, it was pretty crowded.

Ledford: It was air-conditioned I guess right?

Wisovaty: I don't think so. We also carried our C-rations in there which took up quite a bit of room.

Ledford: What did it feel like? What did it smell like?

Wisovaty: It was real hot, but you got to realize I was 20 or 21 years old. Heat didn't bother me at all. Plus, you got used to it. As I recall, the first day or two you were in Vietnam, probably the first day or two you'd be in Iraq, it took some getting used to. Once you'd been there for a little while, particularly since you were young, it wasn't really a problem. It was just the fact that the beer was awful hot.

Ledford: Ok so difficult question. My brother was in the 101st Airborne. He had a number of different jobs with that. He eventually became a desk clerk for a general. I know based on his experience that no matter what you're a cog. You're a cog on a wheel that is part of a huge machine. The goal of that machine is to win battles, kill people, take territory, etc. Even we have a guy who we've interviewed who was a typist. He speaks about being part of that. I'm just struck by the fact that you weren't firing anything, but you were on the radio. You were ordering napalm and Agent Orange. You're probably familiar with a photograph by Nick Ut who won the Pulitzer Prize of a young girl fleeing a napalm attack. Did you ever think about that?

Wisovaty: What I remember ordering was something called white phosphorous. I can't even tell you what that is, but it was some kind of chemical weapon. I don't know any more than that. I know I never came into personal contact with it. Most of what I learned about the Vietnam War and by far most of what I learned about the history of Vietnam I learned after I got out. At the time, as you said you're part of a large machine, and the goal is to kill as many enemies as possible and to take over a territory and displace the enemy from places. As I also said earlier, your number one goal was to take care of yourself and your buddies and vice versa. I never thought about the context of the war as a whole partially because I was young and stupid. Two weeks after I got there, the Tet Offensive started. I don't remember anybody in my unit saying hey something weird is going on here. I mean yeah there was a lot of activity, but the only access to information we had was something called Stars and Stripes which was a newspaper/magazine produced by the Army. Obviously, they told you their side of it, what they wanted you to believe. I was pretty well clueless. I did get the impression talking to minimal encounters with civilians in the field that we weren't popular there. I couldn't quite figure out why. When I got home and I began talking to some veterans who were knowledgeable than I and had actually studied the history of Vietnam going back to French colonization, through Dien Bien Phu and everything else, then I began to put the pieces together and understand why they didn't want me there. I didn't understand it at the time. I always thought

it was a cool thing to do until I got back and I reflected on the experiences and talked to people more knowledgeable than I. I actually studied the subject.