

Interview with Wade Lemons

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Interview # 1:

Interviewer: WILL Staff

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Lemons: Wade Roy Lemons. W-a-d-e R-o-y L-e-m-o-n-s.

Interviewer: That's my favorite fruit. And would you please state and spell your place of birth?

Lemons: Scheller, Illinois. S-c-h-e-l-l-e-r. Illinois, you know how to spell that.

Interviewer: Some people don't know how to pronounce it, but everyone knows how to spell it. And could you state your date of birth?

Lemons: July 19, 1948.

Interviewer: Okay. So before we get into your service, I kind of just want to do a quick little biography. Tell me about growing up in a smaller town.

Lemons: Well, I was raised for the first twelve years, we had a farm out in the country, with cattle and pigs and whatever. And we moved to Sesser in 1960, and it was kind of a new thing to me, because this was like a big city after living there with my brothers and sisters. That was the family element, now there's real people hanging out, that they're related to me, you know. It was pretty good, it was really nice around there, it was very laid back, we done what kids did. You know, we played till the streetlights came on, and threw rocks up in the air to get the bats to dive, and fished and hunted and all that stuff. It's just a pretty laid-back life. In high school, it got to be the cars and girls and try to sneak a beer in every now and again and just normal kid stuff. There wasn't anything dramatic going on actually, but it was pretty, it was fun. That was the bottom line.

Interviewer: Kids nowadays, who knows if they know what rocks are?

Lemons: No, they wouldn't know what a bat was unless (unintelligible) bit its head off.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your family.

Lemons: I'm a member of my brothers and sisters, I have eight brothers and sisters. Six brothers and two sisters, I've lost one brother and one sister. So we're still seven strong. And believe it or not, my parents lived together and survived for sixty-seven years together until my mom passed, and my dad passed three

years later. And I have four daughters, I was married twice. I had three daughters by my first marriage, one daughter by my second marriage. And that's about my family. Of course, I have a gazillion and seventeen cousins, don't have any uncles left. We're a very large family actually. Be fruitful and multiply, we Lemons, and that's what we do.

Interviewer: Like a Catholic rabbit.

Lemons: Amen, brother.

Interviewer: What age were you when you heard about the Vietnam conflict?

Lemons: I was in, actually in high school. That was, the first time I really started hearing about it was right, I think my senior year in high school because, you know, it was getting time for me to graduate high school, and some of my friends, they graduated a year before me, had already signed up for the draft, and some of them were already in the military. Then that was the awakening, and say, hey, guess what. Didn't learn too much on the news, never was about the news, and then it all of a sudden, it hit me, and I'm thinking, oh, wow. And then when I went and signed up and put my name in at the post office when I turned eighteen years old, and they gave me, went up and took my physical, and they classified me 1A, I'm thinking, oh boy. You better get ready to get your green jeans on cause it's going to happen. And it did. And I mean it, I don't know, it was, like, like surreal, you know, like watching combat on TV. It just didn't, I don't know, it was just so far away, that's not going to be nothing, but it was, needless to say.

Interviewer: So you had a group of friends who were actually?

Lemons: Right, right. As we went through the years, it's quite, several of the kids who went to high school, not a lot of them went to Vietnam, actually. Some of them, had one friend spent his time at Fort Leonard Wood doing what you're doing now, so I said, you lucky dog, you. It's just, everybody has their part to do, so that's what everybody says, so I just went along, just followed the program.

Interviewer: When you, so you did volunteer, you were not drafted?

Lemons: I was drafted.

Interviewer: Oh, you were drafted.

Lemons: Yeah.

Interviewer: Well, let's speak a little bit about that. What were your feelings about the draft then?

Lemons: I thought that's what we were supposed to do. I come from a long violent line of veterans. I have veterans all the way back to the Civil War in my family. And that's when your country calls you go, without hesitation. It may not be the most politically correct thing to do, but that's what we did. That's what my family did. I guess we were just volunteer cannon fodder. I don't know, but it just what seemed the right thing to do. And at that time, I thought it was righteous from the stuff that I did watch on TV about what was going on

there. Those poor folks need some help, and maybe we're not the police force of the world, but still, those folks needed help.

Interviewer: Is that what you were hoping to do?

Lemons: Yeah, that was what I was hoping to do, make their lives a little bit better. Give them a chance at democracy, anyhow, because I know, you have to understand, the time I was born, from the time we went to school, it was Russia, or Soviet, USSR, call it that, I get tongue-tied sometimes. But it was just like, better dead than red, and old McCarthy and all these people were preaching this. And as a young impressionable child, you pick up on this stuff and say, hey, this is wrong, and I still believe it's wrong. I'll go to my grave thinking I done the right thing by doing what little I did, for nothing it seems like, but we did try.

Interviewer: Well that was definitely a political motivation at the time to stop the spread of Communism, to try to export a capitalist democracy for these nations. And I know that was in the hearts of a lot of people when they went over. What were you, I don't know even if you were told, were you given any information about your mission before you went over?

Lemons: Well, it, went through basic and AIT, and when I went through basic training, it was about the six weeks in basic training, they offered me, if I would sign up for another year in the army, I wouldn't be in the infantry. That was the option I had. I said, well, I don't know, at that time, newly married and had a small child, or getting ready to have a small child, or baby, whatever, most

babies are little, anyhow. And I was of that mindset, you know, if I'm gone two years, that's a lot, a year less than three, so I opted out of that motivation, so to speak. And I, as I went to the infantry, that's what I did. And that was their spiel, we'll give you this, but yeah. You can have this, but you can't have that, you know.

Interviewer: Sounds like my mom. Let's do this. Before we really delve into your time over there, I'd like to give a little context of just that time period. The 1960s was just one of the most fascinating periods in American history, as far as what went on in this country and let's talk a little bit. I have a feeling people my father's age, the baby boomer generation, almost everyone has an answer to this question, so I'll ask you. Do you remember where you were when President Kennedy was shot?

Lemons: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Could you talk a little bit about that?

Lemons: Yes, I was actually at the funeral home. I'd lost a niece who passed away from spinal meningitis. And I heard it there, I remember it very well.

Interviewer: What was going through your mind when you heard that?

Lemons: It was, right then, it didn't impact me that much because, you know, we lived in our own little world, and that was my grief because I'd lost my baby niece. And it brings a tear to my eye still yet, and but then, didn't have the impact and I seen it at a later date, the next day, and I'm thinking, holy crap. This is

just not good at all. And I wasn't, I don't know, my family, believe it or not, were Republicans, my dad was a hardheaded Republican. And it impacted him, too, you don't want to see anyone suffer that, you know, be killed just because of whatever it was, and who knows what it was, to this day nobody does. Yeah, that's where I was at. I can remember just as plain as day.

Interviewer: Sure, sure. As far as another question that really no one has an answer to, a lot of people have opinions. Let's get yours on it. Cause it is a hypothetical, it's almost a thought experiment. Had President Kennedy not been shot, not been assassinated, do you feel, and he of course would've been the Democratic nominee the following year, let's just say beat Goldwater, do you think the war would've progressed differently had it been?

Lemons: I really don't think so. I really don't. Honestly, I don't because it was almost like it was cast in stone, it was laid out. I know Lyndon Johnson had an impact on it, by all means, but he was, and I think he followed a lot of President Kennedy's mandates, but he was just following through with a lot of stuff. A lot of stuff he didn't, but still yet, they were on a mindset all their own, and I think it would probably gone the same way, honestly. I might be wrong, but just the way the signs read, how you get a mental focus on it, and that's what I think. But I might be wrong, but who knows, who could tell. That is a hypothetical, you know.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Along that same line, obviously LBJ was, I mean you could make an argument that we had advisors over there under Eisenhower, you could

make an argument that it started with Kennedy keeping that going. LBJ definitely put his stamp on foreign policy and definitely dictated the progression of the war during his presidency. What are your thoughts on LBJ?

Lemons: I wasn't very impressed by him, honestly. He was just, he just, I don't know, he just didn't look honest to me. Just his outward appearance, and the way his demeanor, you know, and it just, act like he was sneaky or something. Honestly, that's what I thought, and evidently he was. I seen some of the repercussions, some of the blowback of being Lady Bird Johnson and selling stuff to the military and stuff like that. May not be, I might've gotten the wrong information, but I heard that in Vietnam that sandbags were made, I don't know if this is true. That's just only a rumor, you know how rumors operate.

Interviewer: Yes, I do, back from my high school days. Well, let's just follow this train for the next too. LBJ says he doesn't want to run again, he denies being the candidate for the Democratic party. Richard Nixon runs, wins on the platform of having a secret plan to end the war. In many ways, there is evidence that he tried, as far as gradual withdrawal of troops. However, there is also great evidence that he exacerbated some of it, and I'm not saying that's either good or bad thing, but just as far as increasing the number of bombings. How do you feel about when Richard Nixon got into office and he had control of the direction of the war? Your opinions on him as a president?

Lemons: I think in all sincerity, in my personal opinion, he always wanted to stop the war, but when you draw a line in the sand, oh you can go here, but you can't go any further, and I think the bombing, I know, war is hell. There's no way getting around it. These poor South Vietnamese folks, they weren't really having all the best luck either. But anyhow, I think honestly he was trying to do good, that might not be the right answer, but in my personal opinion, I do. Cause he sent us into Cambodia, and I'm telling you what, it made, it had an impact. Well, that's probably later on in the interview, but it was, it made an impact, and it did change. I got over in September of '69, and it wasn't very long when things started happening.

Interviewer: Obviously the only president who resigned his office over, especially over third-rate burglary, sort of thing like that, do you think, cause obviously Ford took, Ford ended our participation, do you think had Nixon not resigned, not had, had not gone through the Watergate scandal, had not resigned his office, had served his full second term, do you think the war would've had any different of a outcome

Lemons: I think it would've ended quicker. I really believe it would. I do because he was, he wasn't, we wasn't going to, you don't slap my hand, I'm going to come up and kick your butt. I'm trying to monitor my mouth cause I have an army mouth, so I'll try to keep that to a minimum, but anyhow. Yeah, I think it would've, the impact would've been a lot different. But I might be wrong too, that's only speculation on my part.

Interviewer: We'll end with this president, and this line, but of course Gerald Ford got us out. Very divisive action on his part. Some veterans feel that if we just would've stuck it out a little bit more, we could've accomplished our goals. Some people felt we should've pulled out years before then. What are your thoughts?

Lemons: I think we were already committed. And when we turned all of our missions over to the South Vietnamese Army, and I don't know what was the matter with those folks. We were fighting for them, and they didn't seem to have much interest in fighting. I think if the American troops stayed on the ground, I mean. People say we lost the war, but how do you lose a war and never lose a battle? The only closest thing to losing anything it wasn't anything like Dien Bien Phu with the French, it was Khe Sanh and we held out. I mean, that was one of the biggest impacts. There was skirmishes and Hamburger Hill and all stuff, but that's any war. You have, we still come out on top. Sometimes the cost was dear, but I just, those folks didn't have the heart to fight. I hope I'm not straying away from your question.

Interviewer: Nope, not at all.

Lemons: And they just, you know, they seemed to want to sit around the house and make babies and play in the rice paddies.

Interviewer: I've heard a very similar analogy used between that and, perhaps, the people of Iraq, needing to want it for themselves, needing to have their own Thomas

Payne, their own Thomas Jefferson, their own John Adams, to instill that. And until they want it for themselves, how can we, you know.

Lemons: You can, you only help people so far, you can't, so to speak, live their lives for them. I know what you're saying. If they would've stood up, you know, I mean, it's going to cost you some, but still yet, in the long run, I think back, you know, kind of a little bit of a history buff, and a good point in mind is in Warsaw, Poland, those freedom fighters fighting from the sewers, eating rats. If you had determination, you may not win, but you're going to still try. And these folks were just very, very bad about not trying. They would bail on you. Please don't use that, it might offend somebody, but I just, that's just.

Interviewer: Oh no, yeah sure, no, that's a valid opinion, absolutely.

Lemons: They just weren't into, we were, not everybody, gung-ho, every person that I knew, our goal in life was to get home, and get home with as many of us as we could do, and that's what our job was. It was, we had tactical missions and everything, but our priority was get our butts back to the good old US of A. And that's a fact.

Interviewer: My father says something very similar, that was the prime goal, was just to come back to his family. I mean, really, that was the main motivating factor. Let's go ahead and backup, and we'll go a little chronological questioning here. Let's take it back to you were drafted, you entered basic training. Talk a little bit about that, that's an experience.

Lemons: Yeah, that was a scary little thing. That's just a transition in life, you have to be there to appreciate. You're walking out there and it was just all, it's all hunky-dory fine, and then all of a sudden, the world falls on your head. My first experience as a real army life was a duffel bag drill, I don't know if you know what that is. At Fort Leonard Wood we lived in brick barracks, they were squad bays so to speak, they were three stories high. And at the bottom, we stacked our duffel bags out in front of us. Then at their command, we ran up those stairs to the third floor and put our duffel bags on the floor, ran back down the stairs. "You're too slow, go back and get your duffel bag." You go back up there. And this went on. This is the guy right off the street. I thought my lungs were going to explode. It seemed like forever. That was like the first really encounter with the military, I got there in the first week, I'm going to backtrack a little bit, I filled hypodermic needles with serum for all the shots that we were going to get. And I was trying, I fell in between one of these basic training classes that was going to start, so evidently there was several of us doing it, so there was a lot of people. They were running people through, eight weeks, pop, pop, pop. Then they'd run your guts out. And I learned a lot, I learned so much. I learned that I was stronger than what I thought I was. You can do a lot more than what you think you can when you're properly motivated, and a lot of it, you motivate yourself because nobody wants to be a screw-up, or whatever, and have somebody pointing their finger. You don't want to have your nose facing in the dirt doing pushups the rest of your life,

and that's what it seemed like, an eternity. And you done your best, tried to do good. I learned a lot. I learned my job, evidently, cause I'm still here.

(chatter about allergies)

Interviewer: So you're in, you finish your basic training. You get the word. You're going over. Jerry actually asked me to ask you about the route you took to get to Vietnam. He said you had to...

Lemons: I had a couple more stops before I went to Vietnam. I went to AIT at Fort Lewis, which was Advanced Individual Training, or Advanced Infantry Training. Then I went to NCO school at Fort Benning, then I went back to Fort Lewis again, and then I went to Vietnam. So it was a little, NCO school, that was, I think that was a contributing factor probably why I'm here today cause I learned another twelve weeks of intense training. They can say what they want to, if you know stuff, it's better than not knowing. We had a better idea, besides that the pay was better. I went over as an E5.

Interviewer: That never hurts.

Lemons: That's, it wasn't all that much, but still you had. And as far as my route, left from Sea-Tac Airport and flew to Anchorage, Alaska, and either Kadena or Yokota, someplace in Japan, Okinawa, one of the other, I don't know which, and landed in Cam Ranh Bay. That's the route I took, going over. Coming back was just one stop, it's someplace, Kadena or Yokota, I get them mixed up. Gosh, it's only been forty-five years, should be fresh in my mind.

Interviewer: I can't remember what I had for supper last night, so I'm very impressed that you're able to recall as much.

Lemons: I think I had some Miller Light for supper last night.

Interviewer: That's a good dinner.

Lemons: No, I'm teasing.

Interviewer: If this doesn't really stand out, it's not really a deal breaker question, it's just something they would like us to ask. Before you were drafted, before you were in the military, before you went over, the media coverage of what was happening over there. Do you believe it was fair, balanced?

Lemons: As I said earlier, I was a young man. I didn't have time for the news, honest to goodness. I would prefer to watch Carol Burnett or something, I didn't know what was on then, but still yet. You know, I wasn't, I don't know, it just didn't seem that important at the time. The news coverage, I noticed it more when I came back from Vietnam, I guess I paid closer attention.

Interviewer: Okay, let's talk about that little bit.

Lemons: They picked and chose their stories carefully, and it was always, it was mostly, it seemed like to me, it was either we lost two, they lost five, we lost three, they lost seven. It was all about numbers, it seemed like. It wasn't really about the impact that we were having or anything like that. It was more body count, I think. That's my own personal opinion, and then, we're never going

to win this war, that's really very, very, very, you know, that picks a fella right up off the ground, let me tell you, if you happened to hear that. And there were news broadcasts there, if you had the opportunity to get back in the rear little bit. We had TV programs, believe it or not. And we had a radio station, if you were allowed, but that didn't work in the field because we didn't do that.

Interviewer: Do you think, now that you've seen the way our media had covered the first Gulf War, this recent investment in both Afghanistan and Iraq, do you see a marked change of how the media covers war between your generation and now?

Lemons: Yeah, I do. Just the case in point, a SEAL team landing on a beach in Iraq, and all of a sudden CNN news just hitting them with cameras when they walk onto the beach. Now that's just a little extreme. I know there's always been reporters as far back as who knows, but this is getting a little bit up close and personal I think, but still yet, they're still just editing what, they're showing you what they want you to see. They don't show the whole picture, you know. I know news is not a documentary. It's sensationalism, I know that's what gets the ratings, and that's the ratings war, is what it is.

Interviewer: It is, it is.

Lemons: That's the way I see it. Iraq, Gulf War, the war of Iraq and Afghanistan is a rating war, I'm thinking.

Interviewer: Okay, so, you've landed in Vietnam. Talk me through your first day.

Lemons: First day, it was surreal. First thing that hit me when I got off the airplane was the heat and the smell. The smell was, it wasn't what I was used to, let me tell you. We landed in Cam Ranh Bay, and Cam Ranh Bay was sand. I see all these wooden pallets all over the place, right, and lo and behold, there were people wearing black pajamas with little rice hats on. They were there, I seen them. And we were here, there, and there, and best around, looked like, almost like cow barns is what it was, sectioned off. Spent one night in Cam Ranh. There wasn't really much happening the first day I was there. We were there, basically. We found some beer and we drank some. And then the next day, the following day, I was sent to so-called Cherry School in Biên Hòa.

Interviewer: What's Cherry School?

Lemons: It was a seven day, like a refresher course. Being in the first (unintelligible) repelling and stuff, and squad tactics. Just basic, you know, and kind of give you a heads up of what was going on, going to happen to you, you know. I mean, they kept telling you this, this, this, and this. This had happened to this, and it's always poor Joe Blow. Sometimes it's made up, but most of it was true to life stuff, to give you an idea of what you were getting into. And that was very, you pay attention to stuff like that cause, gosh, if you don't pay attention, you don't make it.

Interviewer: That's very true. That's very true. Talk a little bit, if you would be so kind, as maybe just, obviously, you have more experiences of this than you can

probably even recall. But share with us, try to give us a feeling of what it's like to actually go out there, I mean, go out with your platoon.

Lemons: Well, it ain't boy scouts, I'm telling you. And anyhow, it was, I can remember what sticks out in my mind more than anything is the stuff that we carried on our backs in that weather. I mean, it was ninety to a hundred-pound pack on our backs with all the stuff that we carried. And it got into a routine. I wasn't in combat three hundred and sixty-five days, I'd be lying. It was skirmishes here, there and yonder. And, but still yet, I can remember how my shoulders felt carrying that damn rucksack, and that's why they called us grunts, cause every time you get off the ground, you grunted. And you learned a lot of stuff, how good C-rations aren't, and how good a hot meal every three days really tastes like, even if it's bacon and eggs, I mean, I'm telling you what, and you're eating out of a can, trust me. It's good. And it was, you had to change your whole mindset. We ruled the daylight, they ruled the dark. So at night, everybody got, how do you say this, really super alert. We pulled our positions. We had to guard ourselves. Light discipline, noise discipline. You didn't try to make any noise. And you just got to be super alert. It was a hundred percent alert a hundred percent of the time because our, the terrain we were in, it was up close and personal, if you know what I mean. It was thick. And you could walk right up on somebody, and if it was the wrong person, it might not be a good thing. So it was just like bam, in a literal sense. It was just there. And that's, it was a big old camping trip, and I don't know if you ever camped, but this is not the best camping trip I was ever on. There was bugs,

you could sleep at night, and termites would eat your bedding or your air mattress, and you'd hear this terrible thing, when you hear night, "tssss," cause the termites done chewed a hole in his air mattress, and going to be sleeping on the ground. And the vermin, the bugs, it was everywhere.

Mosquitoes, leeches. Not a nice place to be. And that was the first impact that I got, any strange animal sounds at night. That was some dandies. There was less banshee squalls in the middle of the night. You know, whoa, they don't got, we don't got this in big muddy bottoms, you know.

Interviewer: My dad tells me that there are just so many snakes, so many that he would cross a river, and it just seemed the river was made of snakes, there were just so many. He developed a phobia, rightfully so, because of that. So, let's say you're out on a skirmish and as reports tell us, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong did do a lot of attacking at night. What was it like being out there and knowing that the enemy was out there, and?

Lemons: Well, that's where, I'm going to say this, you got to have your shit wired real tight and that's, you're dependent, with guard positions, squad positions, and when you're on guard duty, you were on guard duty. And I mean to tell you, because you never knew. We didn't ever get, they used to probe, like, fire bases all the time. They'd probe them, but out in the woods, they kind of left us alone at night. You would have to be a genius to get down to there without killing yourself, and we hardly moved at night for that reason unless you had something to go on. But out in the fields was the best place to be for me because fire bases, they was all cleared out, they was wide open. Those guys

know where they were, and they wanted them, they didn't like people there. They didn't like us there. They didn't like those artillery pieces there. Like I said, you had to be alert, no doubt about it, but on the fire base it's even worse. You had to be stoked. It's all fun and games until someone pees in the porridge, you know.

Interviewer: I'm going to have to use that. Talk a little bit, if you would, about, because you touched upon this, I would be interested to hear a little bit more if you could unpack it, it's a culture shock when you go over there.

Lemons: Yes.

Interviewer: Those are the words that my dad always uses. It was a culture shock. And you talked about first thing you noticed was oppressive heat and unusual smells. What about the Vietnamese culture did you learn while you were over there? Good things? Bad things?

Lemons: I didn't know, you know, believe it or not, this may sound, the only Vietnamese people I interacted with was when we pulled out of the, come out of the field, and I can see, one little funny story, may or may not be funny to you. Coming out of the field, you been out in the woods for thirty days, you're going to be a little bit scuzzy. The first thing you want is a shower, and that's just, you need one, trust me. You don't notice it on anybody else because you all smell the same. This is my own personal, I'm in a shower house, and I'm just scrubbing up, I'm soapy, and a little Vietnamese woman about this tall, I don't know how old she was, it was hard to tell, she may have been thirty six

or something like that. "Me wash you back, G.I.?" And I remember that today, no modesty whatsoever. Their culture was not built on modesty. Cause they would relieve themselves on the side of the road. It was just, that's what they did. Men, women, boys, girls, everybody.

Interviewer: That's what Jerry was talking about too, that he'd be face down in a rice patty, and then you'd see floaters come by.

Lemons: Trust me, I don't, the only rice patties I seen was when I was down around Biên Hòa. I was up north, a little further, it was jungle, they had different crops up there, whatever they were. Guava, or whatever the crap that stuff was. They were hunters and gatherers up here. And a lot of betel nuts. It's that, if you ever, ask your dad about betel nuts.

Interviewer: Okay.

Lemons: They chew the leaves on that stuff, and it was black, it was like an opiate, like chewing coca leaves. And they'd get all buzzed up on that. Their teeth turned black. A pretty little girl gave you big old smile with black teeth.

Interviewer: I know some girls locally. There was and, again, not saying that this is a question that you have to answer personally or say I did or didn't do this but maybe just give your opinion. Escapism was something that a lot of veterans tried to accomplish over there, some through drugs. You, you yourself?

Lemons: Beer. No. just beer. The situation we were in, you needed every bit of your wits about you. I swear. You had to be there. You had to be a hundred percent,

and it goes back. The escapism, I'm thinking, were people in the rear, and honest to god I believe that. If I'm wrong, they had more time to do this. We didn't have time to do that crap, you go up in ten, fifteen clicks, a day out in the bush, you ain't got time, who's going to, where you going to get it anyhow? They ain't going to bring it to you on a helicopter. If you don't get it on a helicopter you ain't got it.

Interviewer: I think it's, it's a large part, a construct of Hollywood, too, sometimes they.

Lemons: Right.

Interviewer: They overly.

Lemons: It's just like the movie *Platoon*. That was so, that was biggest comedy I ever watched. We didn't shoot our own people, trust me. There was plenty of other people out there to do that for you, if they wanted that to happen, and trust me, that's my own personal experience. I'm not going to say it didn't happen cause people get crazy.

Interviewer: It's war.

Lemons: And the drugs, I seen guys smoke weed in the rear, but they didn't do that in field.

Interviewer: Oh, sure, sure.

Lemons: I mean, I didn't, but I'm a redneck, I'm from southern Illinois. I didn't know what the crap was, you know. What the hell are you doing?

Interviewer: There's a question on here that WTVP would like me to ask, and I think it's just more of a generic, someone who was around then who may have experienced seeing it in the field, or just know of fellow soldiers who had experiences. But what did you know of the chemical napalm before the war? Did you know anything about it?

Lemons: No.

Interviewer: Now, did you know anything about it during the war?

Lemons: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Could you talk a little bit about it? What is it?

Lemons: It's just like, napalm is just jelly diesel fuel, and you detonate it, and it throws a big fire, and fire sticks to you and burns you up. That's what it does, that's what it is. And I wasn't real close to it, but you didn't want to, you could feel the heat a pretty good way because it's like a, I don't know. You ever built a brushfire and throw gasoline on it, I'm sure everybody has, and you get your nose hair singed and your eyebrows, well this was just. You could feel the heat from it and it was intense. And if you ever happened to run across somebody that had been in contact with it, you definitely knew what had happened to them. And that's as far as I'd like to go with that, if you don't mind.

Interviewer: No worries, absolutely. I'm going to save this question for a little later. You already answered that. Can you give us a, well here, I'll tell you what, my dad,

it's hard to say can you give me a humorous story, we're in a war. There's not a lot of humorous stories. My dad talks about, he just thought it was interesting, kind of funny to him in a weird way that a big thing was keeping clean socks. That you had to have three pairs of clean socks for every mission, and that, is there anything like that you could talk about? Just those little things?

Lemons: Everybody, socks were important, let me tell you. During monsoons especially. You'd get up, you had about thirty to forty-five minutes after you're up, you had to get your chow in your belly, so to speak, eat a quick bite, and get ready for it to start raining. So we'd move until about eleven o'clock and stop, and eat, and wait for it to start raining. This went on all day, and they had a little break in the evening, ate real fast, get your hooch set up, wait for it to start waiting. And you got so miserable with socks and foot powder. And everybody carried usually an M60 ammo can had all our ditties in there. I mean, this is private stock of everything you had, and since I was a smoker I had cigarettes in there, and I had two pairs of socks. And those socks, you know, it may sound strange, but I didn't change socks till morning because we slept with our boots on. Just that. You never knew. It didn't happen, but it could, it happened to a lot of folks. It didn't happen to us, per se. You'd get up, and man, your feet would smell so bad. I'm telling you, you think you opened a whole can of buttholes, let me tell you, when you pulled your boots off. And they were good boots, they dried out fast, but they had a lifespan of about two months in the monsoon season. They would just flat fall

apart. And that was the funniest thing, that everybody had foot powder, looked like snow has hit, in the morning everybody powdering their feet. It did some good. I'm still walking, you know, but that's, socks, and well, didn't wear underwear. We were all commandos, that would eat you alive, believe it or not, and that's where that foot powder come into too if you were a portly person. I wasn't very big, but some of the larger statured. There wasn't anybody fat there, honest to god, it was bigger people, and you know, their thighs were bigger and they rubbed together, believe it or not, and they'd get sore. And after what happened with underwear, we all, a little foot powder inside your thighs. It wasn't the most appetizing thing to see everybody doing, but by golly, we wasn't chafed. And the best thing was on log day, I don't know, that was, we get log every three days, get food, water, ammo, supplies, whatever we needed, and I can remember every time the bantering over who was going to get what C-ration meal. And a lot of, we sent back, we lived on, a lot of us lived on peaches and pound cake, fruit. Some of that stuff, it was alright, I mean, but it just wasn't all that after a while. I could just see it now, squabbling. I don't like that, well, okay. Most of the time it worked out pretty good. The humor is, it was very hard to find.

Interviewer: Yes, yes.

Lemons: But you had to find humor in stuff. It was funny. You see somebody fall on their butt and slide down a hill, you kind of chuckle as long they weren't hurt. Cause you're, probably going to be you next, if you ever tried to walk on, if you ever try to, you know how slick, when you got a hill like this, and it's,

well, it's just like this old red clay around here, only a lot redder and it's slicker than goose snot. At any minute you could go on a skiing trip and not really want to, and that's kind of already a hundred and sixty a pound man, ninety pound a pack, or hundred pound a pack, that's a lot of weight. Inertia takes over real quick.

Interviewer: You touched a little bit about, and you know, I, almost every Vietnam veteran I've had the pleasure of speaking to and who has shared stories, always has a story about the weather, just being the extremes of every end.

Lemons: Yeah it's either hot and wet or wet and hot, it seemed like. The dry season, you know, you get rain, and then it'd cool off. I'm saying cool off, it might get down to ninety degrees, and believe it or not, it was cold. It felt cold. You would wake up in the morning shivering sometimes, and that doesn't make any sense now, but I very rarely, at this stage at my life, if I wake up and it's ninety-five degrees out, I'm cold, unless I'm sleeping in a refrigerator or something like that. And the monsoons, they were just, and they brought out every bug, every leech. Those leeches, I swear. I know you've seen inchworms, haven't you? As your dad about the leeches. He'll tell you. They got in places they oughtn't to be.

Interviewer: I can't imagine, no, and it's amazing, not only what you had to go through just in the situation of it all, but you had on top the weather and all these things. It's unreal, and it's amazing that you were able to, you know.

Lemons: It was a survival situation, not only because you had people shooting at you. That place over there ain't fit to live in. I mean, I don't know how they do it. I would move, I tell you, I would. That place is just. But evidently, they like it there, or they wouldn't be there. They've been there for thousands of years, you know. And some of the oldest cultures in the world come from Southeast Asia, and Cambodia especially. I don't remember their names offhand, but they abandoned that civilization, so, but I don't know. But on another off the subject, call Montagnards. Montagnards were like primitives. And if nobody mentions them, I take it that these people were the bomb diggity. They had it made. They didn't need nothing. Although they were misused by probably both sides, they carried, their weapons were crossbows, they had elephants. Their women didn't wear shirts, and of course that wasn't all that great. Really hard to get all excited with a baby and a piggy on one side, doing this. And they were, they earned my respect. They were our American Indians, so to speak, or Native Americans, I don't want to get, make anybody mad. They've always been Indians to me, and I don't realize. But anyhow, they were, I want to interject that Montagnards were the true people of Vietnam, I really believe they were. That's the way the whole country should've been because they were primitives just like the Amazons. Leave those folks alone. They're doing fine by themselves.

Interviewer: To take it back home a little bit, and this is always a touchy subject, and it definitely gets my dad's blood boiling a bit, but it's an important one to talk about, and that's the protesting movement that happened back home.

Obviously escalating more and more as the years of the war went on. What are your, just, impressions of the protestors back home? I mean, obviously there's a full range of people who tried to do it peacefully. There's the man who set himself on fire in front of McNamara's office, and a whole gambit of range in between. Do you, we could talk about did they have the right to do it? Yes, or no? If it is yes, did they do it in a proper way? What are your feelings about that?

Lemons: The protestors, I understand. I see it in a different light, I'm not even going to bring my own personal opinion into it, but I can tell you, when I got ready to come home, in San Francisco airport, if you would've heard what those people said to me. I just come, twenty-four hours prior to that, I'd been in combat zone. I wanted to kill these people. They were just downright mean. They didn't know me. Questioned, "How many babies did you kill?" Are you kidding me? Do I, I'm not a mass murderer. Just stuff like that. I did have a very low opinion of them, honestly, that's my own personal opinion. Now I, and probably my lowest opinion, I'm not even going to bring up a name.

Interviewer: Sure. No, absolutely. My dad was one who was spit upon when he came back.

Lemons: Correct, and they just mean.

Interviewer: Yeah, they couldn't separate the politicians, who were making the decisions, from the servicemen who were really there just to do their job. And it wasn't, you know, so, I have similar opinions, mostly just from my father and what he told me. The protest did, as I kind of mentioned, they did kind of gain, I'm not

going to say momentum, but they gained impactfulness, and not necessarily in a good way. I just rather mean that protests, and not that there weren't peaceful protests at the end, but by the end of that movement, you had the Weathermen group who were blowing up government buildings. You had violent protestors as well. Do you think that, and you don't have to get into any specifics if you don't want, but do you feel, and this isn't a freedom of speech thing, do you feel that they took it too far?

Lemons: Anytime, you know, that's, the Bill of Rights, got to be used with discretion. Just because I can get up and say, I can print about anything I want to, it used to be, but I wouldn't do it now. It's just, I do believe when you take violence, violence only begets violence. When you protest, okay, if it's a peaceful sit-in, fine. But these folks blowing up stuff? Nah. That's just, it's the same thing in Iraq right now. A terrorist is a terrorist, if he's here or there. We see, they say we're importing them, but I think they've always been here. In the sixties, they were here, trust me, they were blowing up stuff. I didn't like it, but it's the way it was. And then you have another movement that were the so-called hippie movement, the flower children. They were on a completely different spectrum. They didn't want nothing to do with anybody, but then they were all classified as hippies, and hippies got a bad name before these crazy bastards, so to speak. That's my opinion of them, they were just already, they were looking for something. They were pissed off at the world, and they were going to take it out on anybody and everybody. Not just the man, but just

innocent bystanders. When you blow up a government building, who's there, you know? It ain't just government people, for crying out loud.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Do you, well, I'll tell you what, let me throw out a statement at you, and then you can tell me if you agree with it or not. The statement would be that protesters today are better able to separate the soldier from the politician. Do you think you're seeing evidence of that, that when soldiers come back from Iraq, they are having the same experiences as you? Or they're having different experiences?

Lemons: I think they're having different ones because I'm seeing, the only thing I'm seeing from my point of view is veterans welcomed home. That's, I don't see all that many protests, only at the funerals sometimes, but that's even counteracted now. You've got these guys say, well, this is, you should've died over there, and then you've got these old guys, these veterans. We're taking care of our own, I think. And I think that makes a whole lot of difference. And you've got, I don't know how many veterans there are in the United States, but there's quite a few of us. And these people, I don't know what they're protesting about. I don't think war's good, I never would. War's crazy. It don't help anybody, it takes people away. And I know we all justify, so we can all justify what we're doing, but it all boils down to, comes to the same conclusion. People die. And don't, good people or bad people, they're still dead.

Interviewer: Absolutely, absolutely. Personally, I think it's nice to see that our veterans are getting a better reception nowadays. Is it perfect? No, but it can't be any worse than what it was cause it was so bad for you, and for, I mean.

Lemons: You can't, it's hard to explain how you feel when you come back. Now just proud, I had my dress greens on, I had on all, I was decked out. I was looking good. Fine lean, green fighting machine. I come back and they took away all my self-esteem right there on the spot, just by their bantering and yadda yadda yadda. I wanted to almost see red, and I just had to fight that feeling off cause you know, I'm not there anymore. Over there, I could've taken care of that crap. I didn't want to lash out and wind up someplace else. It was very, very, very difficult. And I, and it makes me feel good that our troops come home to a welcome.

Interviewer: Whether you agree with the war or not, it's, it doesn't matter.

Lemons: It doesn't make any difference. You, I, he, we're all tools. We have a function. We all got a place to be in this earth. When our purpose is done, we're done. We all know that. I don't know whether you be pagan, Christian, or whatever, but we have a purpose to be on this earth. When our purpose is done, we're gone. And they served their purpose. They're tools. We're all tools. We all, it's just a fact. It comes down to machines. And they done their job, they come home. They ought to get a pat on the back and a hot cup of coffee and a doughnut if they want it. I'd just throw that in.

Interviewer: Absolutely, absolutely. Let me just, before I move on, let me just make sure I hit the questions that WTVP is wanting. I'm not a fan of how this question is phrased. What were some of the truths you realized about the Vietnam War and its impact?

Lemons: The truths?

Interviewer: It's hard. I can give you what Jerry said, not to sway you, but his answer to that was more of, when we as a country make a commitment, we should follow through. And if we promise our allies support, we can't go back on our word.

Lemons: Right, yeah, that's pretty much what I would've come up with, too. And I could see how it could've been better. At that time, the two wars previous, the war previous was Korea, they draw a line in the sand, you can't cross that. It's okay if they do, but we can't. If they would've fought the war as a war, instead of a, but we weren't in war because they wasn't thinking of a war war, it's crazy. The truth I know about Vietnam, I'm home. I made it. And I know fifty-eight thousand, two hundred and eight people or something like that didn't. And I'm glad to be here. And the impact of the war on me, I grew up, but I think I lost my little kid in me, too. I try to hunt for him still yet. But I don't know. I don't have a definitive answer. That's just, I know we could've done better, if we had the support, had Congress supported this instead of, well, the political wind flows this way, so we got to follow this wind, and therefore, you know. And they cut off your lifelines, so to speak, cut your one

string at a time, a little bit as it goes along. It's not like it was World War II. In Korea it was the same thing. Nobody wanted to be in Korea, for crying out loud. That's a colder Vietnam, what it all amounted to. World War II, they had the whole support of the nation had people out banging, banging on the doors, hey, we need your tires, we need this, that, something else. The whole force of the United States of America pulled together.

Interviewer: My grandmother was in New York, and her family actually did very well during World War II because they owned a honey farm, and since sugar was rationed, they were able to do extremely well during that time. But yeah, sugar, rubber, so much, yeah.

Lemons: I know that strays from the point, but that's the difference in the time. If the whole country would've backed us, per se, and that goes back to protestors and everybody that didn't want us there, I'm sure that war would've changed the whole way, a whole different way. Cause people, after a while, they just, we're there, and it got to be not so much a mission, it was get home, that's the bottom line. You get to call, the short-timer syndrome. I don't know if you ever heard of that.

Interviewer: No, please explain.

Lemons: Everybody carries short-timer's calendar, it'd be whatever picture what it was. You take a pen and you color in every day. You start in about sixty days, and you start sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven. And you get a whole picture

colored, and you got a big yay, go home. Short-timer's calendar. I bet your dad had one.

Interviewer: That's interesting. I'll have to ask him. That's very interesting. Very interesting. Well, the harder questions I like to save towards the end, just because. And before I ask these things, I do like to share a story just to let you know that these things affected my family as well, not that we were any more affected or less than anyone. But my father talks about, they were attacked at night. It was a night raid. And they were surrounded. They were just getting enemy fire from all directions. And my dad couldn't, and it was so dark, and there was just so much noise, you could not tell really which direction to shoot fire. So he was doing his best, and he saw a man with a gun coming towards him, assumed this is the enemy, and shot. It was his friend. And the friend did not make it because of that. Do you, I mean, I know the answer to this question, but I have to ask it as naively as I do, did you know people who lost their lives over there?

Lemons: Lost their lives?

Interviewer: Yes.

Lemons: Yeah, I do.

Interviewer: Okay, I mean, friends, people in your platoon?

Lemons: People in my, real close proximity, how's that.

Interviewer: And, again, I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but could you speak a little bit about that?

Lemons: No, I can't.

Interviewer: Okay, sure.

Lemons: That's, after a lot of psychoanalysis, and I suffer from PTSD, and I just prefer. If I cut you short, I'm sorry, but I can't do that. I can't open that, I can't open that door.

Interviewer: And we're going to skip right over it.

Lemons: Thank you.

Interviewer: No worries whatsoever, no worries whatsoever. How are you doing with your Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Lemons: Well, I got diagnosed in 2008. But I was reluctant to go to the VA because in my mind, if I'm getting stuff from the government, just taking away from somebody else. And I got myself tricked out on that down there, and they told me, you dummy. And now, you know, they helped me a lot. We all deal with situations differently, and I tried alcohol first. It didn't work, and just messed up, hard to explain how it is. I don't even know if there is an explanation. I don't even know how it is. When we self-medicate, I think sometimes it does a bit more harm than good.

Yeah, that's it. It wasn't anymore than a lot of beer, but it got to be a real ritual. That's how I got, I was always angry, it seemed like. I don't know why I was mad, but I was mad. It was just those bad dreams keep you awake at night, and come back and haunt you. And that's, therefore, that's why I say I can't do that.

Interviewer: Absolutely. I understand completely, I really do. I really do. Say I'm an eighteen-year-old, and I'm watching this at home for the first time. I know the Vietnam War, but this has helped me learn so much more about it than I ever would from a textbook. I'm really hearing live stories. What would you want me to take away from this? I'm an eighteen-year-old kid, I might join the military soon, my life's ahead of me, I don't really know where I stand politically. What lesson can I gain from your experience?

Lemons: Oh, that's. Well. Be smart. Go to school. Learn all you can because if you're smart, sometimes you got ways of getting out of stuff. You got to make do, do the best you can with all you got to do. And we're all basically, at eighteen to sixty-six, like I am, we're all survivors. We all want to survive. And the better tools you get to survival, that's the more life you're going to have. That's all about I can say. I just think you got to be yourself and be the best you can. And I know it's not, the army of one, that's not even what I'm trying to say. But it's just, we got to be the best that we can be.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Lemons: Cause it's a fast-moving world. Technology that I've seen in my years, it's just.

Interviewer: Amazing. I still don't know how to work my phone accurately. Well, Wade, I really thank you so much for this. You've really shared a lot from your heart, and I know it's, this is a very difficult topic. It is. And I want you to know how much I appreciate what you've done today. This is not easy. But I want you to know that what you've done today is going to make a difference, and I think people are going to benefit from hearing you. And I thank you so much for your time, sir.

Lemons: Thank you. I thank you for having me because, it's a simple reason, we can actually talk about this stuff now. And there's a lot of years I didn't want to talk about it. I can now, up to a point, but even I have my limits. And I thank you for having enough interest in it. And it's gotten this way, I'm just going to interject this, my little final whatever if we're done, I have so many people, and I don't know what happened in the past five years. I walk in Lowe's. A man stops in uniform, I got a hat on like this, and shakes my hand. And he's wearing war patches from Iraq, and he thanks me for my service. And civilians hollering at you off the street, see a hat, hey, thank you for your service, brother. My god, where have these people been? It's just an awakening, I think.

Interviewer: Isn't that nice?

Lemons: It is. It feels good.

Interviewer: It does.

Lemons: It really does.

Interviewer: It's such a 180.

Lemons: Yeah. It's just like, daylight and dark. Before, I wouldn't go out wearing a hat like that. You've been to Vietnam, damn, what's the matter with you. But now. I think maybe, I think maybe the people in the sixties, the protestors, have gotten older or something, or killed themselves or whatever. I don't know. I don't mean that, a little jest. They've grown up, I think, and really can see that their opinion was valued, but it wasn't, everybody's opinions is like, it is what it is.

Interviewer: Absolutely.