

## Interview with Terry Hairrell

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Interviewer: WILL Staff

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Hairrell: My name is Terry Hairrell. I am sixty-six years old, soon to be sixty-seven in April. I'm from Waukegan, Illinois. I was born in Libertyville, Illinois which is about twenty miles west of Waukegan. I served in the Army from March 7<sup>th</sup> of 1967 until March 8<sup>th</sup> of 1969.

Interviewer: Could you describe Terry Hairrell, the man before Vietnam, and Terry Hairrell after Vietnam. How were these two people different, if at all? If they were different, could you tell us what caused these changes?

Hairrell: They are drastically different. Before Vietnam, I was a pretty average student I would say. I went to a large high school, participated in athletics and in

school I had a lot of what they called shop classes which involved mechanical drawing. It is now called Computer-Aided Drafting, but there were no computers then of course. I had wood-working. I had some architectural drawing, so my background in high school was geared toward graduating from high school and going out and getting a job. I had no intention of going to college. Because of that intention, I was drafted in March of '67 with the knowledge that I was probably going to go to Vietnam as most people who were drafted did at that time.

I didn't really have any strong feelings one way or the other whether I should go or I shouldn't go. Waukegan was a real industrial town, so very conservative. When you were drafted or when you graduated from high school, a lot of guys joined the Army, or Air Force or Marines. It wasn't unusual, but because of the Vietnam conflict that was just starting up there was some controversy but not a lot. Especially amongst the students, we didn't really talk about it very much. I had a couple of friends that had joined the Marine Corps Reserves, and then they went that summer after I graduated they went to their basic training and came back. They remained in the reserves in the Marine Corps for a number of years after that, but some of the stories that they told me about some of the guys that they had met that had been shipped off, this was in 1966, and then came back. Made them feel like maybe they should get rid of their Reserve status and join. I don't know what you would call it when you get rid of your Reserve status and then you just go into the Marines full-time. I think on second thought they thought better of it. Why

do I need to go there? I think their parents probably had something to do with it also. If they talked to them, they probably talked them out of it.

When I was drafted, I went to Kentucky, and I did basic training in Kentucky. That's eight weeks, and then I went for advanced infantry training down in Fort Polk, Louisiana which was the home of the Vietnam soldier. There was a huge sign that announced that when you came in there, so there was no doubt where you were going. Then I went to a small, little outpost in Panama for some advanced, advanced infantry training. That was about almost a month. That was to learn how to set booby traps, set up claymore mines, and what they call fields of fire. So if you're camped somewhere, you have an idea of where you should put the largest armament that you have, like an M-60 machine gun. You set up your mines. You set up your booby traps, if you're carrying any at the time. That helps you maintain your perimeter when you're out in the field. Well after that, I came home for a month, and then I got shipped there.

I spent my year in Vietnam, and I came back. I remember my parents having a party for me when I got back to Waukegan. There were a lot of people there, and it was really nice to see people and to see everybody again, but I didn't feel like I belonged there. I couldn't really talk to them about things because they really didn't understand what I would be saying. They tried to imagine, but it was hard for them. I really missed the guys I had been with, a lot. I remember going back to our house after our party, and then I asked to borrow my parents' car. I went down, and I spent the night on the

beach and watched the sun come up the next morning. I did that for probably a week. Every night I would go to the beach. I didn't stay all night after the first night, but it helped ease my mind somewhat. So then I kind of eased back into friendships that I had had. I met some young ladies. That really helped.

I ended up going to school at a little school called Western Illinois University, and the reason I went there was because they had a veterans' organization. That really helped me because there were veterans there that had kind of experienced the same sort of things that I did, but I remember at the time that there were not a lot of combat veterans. There were support veterans. They had been in the artillery. They were medics. A lot of the guys had gone to Korea and to Germany, but as far as being a combat veteran, of the good 30 guys that I knew, there were only two of us that had actually seen any combat. That was kind of shocking, but as time went by there...

I went to school for two years there, but I ended up staying in Macomb for five because I had some living to catch up on so to speak. I wasn't a real good student when I first went to college, but I sure did have a good time. In 1975 then, I met my wife. I was having a lot of problems up to that time, some drugs, some alcohol which was not uncommon. As soon as I met her, things really changed and turned around my life a lot. I really owe my life to her. I really think. She's my savior. She's still my guardian angel I think. That's the way I refer to her as. She brings me lots of luck, and I was really a lucky person anyway.

I was in some instances when I was in Vietnam and to this day I don't know why I'm here and why it's not somebody else. Why I made it through and that they didn't? I'll get into later about some of my friends, and the feeling is not unusual. I did eventually come back to school, but I came here to the U of I, and I had a really nice advisor, a guy named Henry Schriedel. He was at the Department of Education, and this was in the late seventies. I want to say 1977. I remember walking into his office, and he was so nice, and I told him my story. He said, "If you really want to go to school here, we can get you in. You're a veteran, and they'll give you special treatment." I said, "Well that's all I need is a chance, and I promise I'll do better than I did when I was in school before." And I did. I graduated in 1980 and got a teaching job. I taught industrial arts which was kind of what I did in high school, same sort of thing. I went up to Watertown, Wisconsin, and I taught in Watertown, Wisconsin for twenty-five years as a full-time teacher. Then, I got tired of it, and I started working on my own. We were still in Wisconsin. My wife was working for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, so she had been there for a long time. She was a public health nurse, and was working with Indian tribes in the state of Wisconsin for public health facilities. It was interesting to listen to her talk about her work, and at the same time we were living in Madison then. We had lived in Watertown for a number of years and moved over to Madison for about eight years, and then we went up to northern Wisconsin in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. We were there for two years. Then we ended up coming back here for family reasons. This is where I am today, a lot different

from when I was eighteen years old. If you would like me to sort of fill in the gaps about what happened in Vietnam, I can tell you some of the things that I remember. I think mentioned before that after the month of March in 1968 I don't remember anything. I can't remember names, or faces or places that we were except that I remember the day I left that country. I remember that vividly.

Interviewer: I want to backtrack a little to you newly drafted, eighteen or nineteen years old. You said they taught you how to set up booby traps. What's going through your mind when you realize what they are asking you to do?

Hairrell: I wanted to learn as much as I could because I figured the more that I learned, the better chances I'd have to survive. I was hoping that I'd never have to do that, and you know what I never really did. We never had to set those things up. The things that you learn, boy you forget them fast. I did learn that because when I got in country the first patrol that I went out on we set up that first night, and my friend, Frank, who was my squad leader at the time, said, "Hey, take this claymore and go set it up out there." I looked at him and I said, "You know what, I can't remember how to do this." So, he had to show me again. It was real simple, but other than that we didn't do that very often. That part of my training I never really had to use. Thank goodness that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong didn't have the types of mines and materials that we had because they are devastating. When they go off, it makes your head explode. They are so loud. They are real vicious, too. Thank goodness I never had to use those.

Interviewer: You never experienced any NVA or VC mines going off?

Hairrell: No, where we were there were a lot of mortars which are these tubes that they have, and they drop the rounds down the tube, and then it shoots out. They were really good with those, but as far as booby traps you would be walking on a trail and you would notice that somebody before you had probably stepped in this booby trap. I know they used to say that they would fill them with punji sticks which are pieces of bamboo that they slice in half, and they take water buffalo dung and they stick it on the end of the bamboo. Then the idea is you fall down in this little hole and this bamboo thing goes through your shoe. I saw several of those, but it looked like someone had tried to set one up. Fortunately, nobody really stepped in one that I knew of which reminds me that in Vietnam when you're traveling from one part of the country to another, you want to stay off the trails. There are trails that civilians use to go from one village to the next. You don't want to walk on those. You want to walk on either side of the trail which means a lot of times where we were there were lots of rice paddies. So, you would walk in the rice paddies instead of on top of the rice paddy dikes which was unfortunate because they were nice and dry, and the rice paddies were wet, of course. You were constantly soaking wet, constantly.

Interviewer: So could tell us a little bit more about that, maybe the sights and the smells. Is there anything that you smell today that reminds you of what it was like to be out there?

Hairrell: Cow manure smells a lot of like water buffalo manure. Water buffalos were, to the Vietnamese people, they were the work horses. Usually if the family had enough money, or even the village had enough money, they had maybe one water buffalo for the whole village. They used the water buffalo for their rice production. I can't really tell you how one of those things worked. I just remember that of the hundreds of villages that we walked through, water buffalos did not like Americans. They could smell them from a long ways away. They would get real agitated when you got close to their village. You could hear them. They would be bouncing around in their pens if they were not out working in the field. The little children were the ones who could calm them down. They were like their pets, so you wanted to stay as far away from the water buffalos as possible.

I remember one day we, it was in October, we came upon this village, and we had set up outside the village. We started receiving some sniper fire from the village, and at the time we were with a group of mechanized infantry. It was the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division. They rode on top of these things called APCs which were large what they called personnel carriers. Usually, an APC in Vietnam you didn't ride inside it. It could carry up to eight people I think. The back dropped down, and you would crawl inside and sit down. You could travel from one place to another. Well in Vietnam, you rode on top of these because if they hit a mine or something people inside would be killed instantly. Actually, there was only one person that was inside of this. He was the driver, and he was in the front. On top of the APC was .50-caliber machine



gun, a huge gun, can do a lot of damage. The bullets are about this long. They are just devastating. Well, when we started receiving our incoming fire, whoever was in charge of the Twenty-Fifth Infantry at the time that that particular platoon decided that they were going to fire above the village hoping that the snipers were in the trees. Hoping that they would hit them and that the sniper fire would stop. Some of these guys of course got carried away and didn't hit the trees. They went lower and started peppering the whole village, so by the time we got done with the .50-calibers, and then we all walked in there together. There wasn't much left. These things are big enough that they can cut down trees. There were dead animals all over the place, and of course there were a couple of water buffalos that had been killed.

Fortunately for us and for the children and for the people that lived in the village, they knew we were there. What they usually do is they have little bunkers inside their little hooches. They fortunately went inside these bunkers, so when we got into the village on that particular day, there was no loss of life except for the animals. But when you lose a water buffalo, you have no means of probably getting another one. I don't know what happened to them after that. We just kept right on going. We didn't stick around the village after that, and I don't remember where we went afterwards.

Interviewer: Could you tell us a little bit more or take us back to your experiences with the civilians or the villagers?

Hairrell: Sure. One of the first people that I met when I got to Vietnam, first civilians, was in the village of Chu Lai. She was a laundry girl. She was a little girl

whose parents did laundry, and that's how they made their money. It wasn't unusual for a lot of the service guys to bring their laundry in and have the Vietnamese do it because they did a really nice job. The village was safe, and I made friends with this girl. I got to see her probably three or four times during the year that I was there. I think it was the second time that I went into the village of Chu Lai. We had been out in the field for a long time. I want to say 30 days, maybe three or four weeks. Apparently, I had lost a lot of weight because the first thing that she said to me was, "Terry, you're *beaucoup* skinny." That means you're really skinny. A lot of the Vietnamese spoke French real well which I didn't. She was nice enough to invite me to come to her parents, it's not a house like you would think of as a house. It's a big thatch roof building. That was her house, but her folks were so nice. She asked me to come to dinner at their house, so I was the guest of honor. It was really strange. There must have been ten people, and here I was and I didn't understand a single word that was being spoken except Kim which was her name. She could translate pretty for us, and her dad wanted to talk to me. He wanted to give me a whole bunch of money so I would go to the military PX in July and buy a bunch of watches, and then bring them back to him and he would sell those. He would sell the watches to whoever he could get to buy them. It's kind of like on the black market. I told him, "No, I really can't do that. It's against the law. I could get into a lot of trouble." He dropped that right there as soon as I said no. He didn't press the matter at all. His real intention was he wanted me to take his daughter to the United States. He said,

“If you can take her, then we can all come over there.” This was in 1967. I had no intentions of taking a Vietnamese girl to the United States, but he thought it was worth a try. I come to find out that one of my good friends, Tony, who was also a squad leader there before my friend Frank was, he had asked him the same question. I don’t know what happened to Kim and her family after I left in August of 1967.

I guess the time that I remember as the most vivid was we had been out on patrol, and we had been receiving on-and-off fire from different places. We somehow got separated. We were with our platoon which is about thirty people. An Army platoon has thirty people, and our squad consisted of about eight to ten people. We somehow got separated from the rest of our platoon, and we started receiving a lot of heavy fire. We had had quite a bit of action the day before this particular incident happened. All of a sudden all of these rounds of artillery started to come in on top of us. My squad leader, Frank, thought that we had run into a huge group of NVA soldiers, and that’s what I thought at the time, too. I then come to find out later on that our unit got separated in such a fashion that part of our platoon was up higher than we were. When we started receiving a few mortar rounds from the Viet Cong, part of our platoon thought that these mortar rounds were coming from where we were, so they started shooting at us. Of course, we returned the fire. Then our lieutenant called in artillery except the artillery didn’t go where it was supposed to go. It went in on top of us. There were two casualties that day. One of them was a Sergeant by the last name of [Harold E.] Cumbie, and my

squad leader, Frank, I remember that he held on to him because Cumbie had been hit pretty badly. He ended up dying right there in the field. Frank had gotten hit where his arm was pretty much hanging there which I didn't think he'd ever be able to use it again. I had a big bunch of shrapnel metal in my shoulder that had hit my shoulder. It had gone through my backpack, and I think that's what saved me from having my shoulder sliced open. It hit my backpack first which had a bunch of C-rations in it, destroyed my ham and beans by the way which was not a good thing, but it saved my life. The shrapnel metal that they took out came close to my lungs and my heart, but it didn't go any farther. Anyway, I remember getting on the helicopter and Frank and I were next to each other, and our Sergeant Cumbie was in the body bag that was in front of us. I never really thought very much about Sergeant Cumbie because I didn't really know him very well. He was what we used to call a 'lifer'. That's the guys who join the Army for life. That's their career. Usually, the people that are lifers, there's not very many of them in the infantry. There's a lieutenant in charge of a platoon, and there are usually three sergeants. They're usually the lifers. The rest of us were all draftees, pretty much. Cumbie wanted to get his combat infantry badge because if you're a lifer and you get that combat infantry badge which means that you've seen combat it gives you a chance for promotion a lot sooner than maybe somebody else would get it. He had been out in the field, and he was learning from our Sergeant named Cooper. Cooper was supposed to be showing him

the ropes. It didn't work out that way. Cumbie lost his life. He had only been out in the field for one week, I think. He died.

Years later, in 2013, my friend Frank and I had got back together. We hadn't conversed or didn't even know each other even existed because we had lost touch. I'll tell you that story after this one. Sergeant Cumbie's wife contacted Frank's sister somehow. I don't know how. Frank's sister did a lot of research, and so his wife contacted Frank and wanted him to come to their house so she could meet him. She had gotten information from the Army, and she kind of knew what happened. She knew one person held onto him when he died. She didn't know it was Frank until later, and when she found out she really wanted to meet him. He said he didn't think he could handle it, meeting her in person, but he would be willing to talk to her on the phone. So they talked for quite a long time on the phone. Then we come to 2013, we have a 196th Light Infantry Brigade reunion in Washington, D.C. I didn't know we had these things, but a bunch of people that were in the squad I was in we all met there. For all of us, it was the first time we had been back together since 1967. When we were at the reunion, this usually goes on for four days, they had a memorial service at the wall in Washington, D.C., and there were two people that came there. It was Sergeant Cumbie's children that wanted to meet us all. It was his son, who had also been in the Army, I think currently still is, and his wife. They had this movie camera, and they took pictures of all of us. We went to the wall, and we found where his name was and everything. It was a very touching moment. I think it really helped Frank a lot to finally be able

to see these folks and talk to them, but Sergeant Cumbie's wife didn't come along with their children. I don't know why.

My friend Frank and I, Frank Montury is his name, it's M-O-N-T-U-R-Y, he came this close to getting the Medal of Honor for what happened that day. If you Google his name, you'll get a hit right away. It'll say Frank Montury, a bunch of information, and if you click on that it'll tell you the story of what happened that day. He received a Silver Star which is the second highest award that you can get. He certainly deserved it, too. Things that happened then, he has really no recollection of what went on for a large part of that. He can't recall anything. Myself, my friend Roke Jeso, who was our squad member. He's one of my best friends. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona. My good friend Carlos Rossi. He lives in Medford, New York. He was with us. Our medic doc was with us at the time, and Tony Lawson who lives in Middlesboro, Kentucky. Middlesboro is a beautiful little town that is down in the south-eastern part of Kentucky by the Cumberland Gap area. It's just gorgeous. Those are my friends that I had spent most of my time with. All of them rotated back to the United States during the months of November and December and January.

Right after the Tet Offensive started up, a lot of those guys left. They had already been in country for a year, so we got a whole new group of people. Those are the guys that I can't remember. I've tried, and I can't remember faces or names. I was with these guys for five months. I don't know why I can't remember them. I tried to find out some information about where

some of them might have been. At our reunion that we had, I thought maybe I'd see some faces that reminded me, and I didn't. I'm hoping this next reunion. We have another one in Daytona, Florida in the end of September this year, and hopefully I'll get to see them then. I'm really hoping because the longer the time goes the more you forget. These guys you don't want to forget them. They're your best friends, and they always will be. Frank, and Roke, and Tony, and I, and Doc and Carlos have kind of a special relationship in that we had been through six months of combat together, and that really draws you close to people. I always said that if I was going to survive whatever happened after that would be a piece of cake. Because once you go through something like that, nothing can be that bad. It hasn't been. I'm lucky. I'm a very, very lucky person. My life has been really good.

Interviewer: Can you tell me how you were emotionally and spiritually different after returning from Vietnam?

Hairrell: Yes, emotionally and spiritually different. Spiritually when I was there, I think I said, "God, if you just get me through all this I promise to be a good boy when I get out of here." Emotionally, I didn't do too well when I first got back. I think I mentioned before that we had a strong veterans' organization in Macomb, Illinois. Just to talk to people, even though they hadn't been through similar circumstances, just to talk to people that were my age really helped a lot. The person that helped me the most was my wife. She's really the kindest person I know and has a giant heart. Whenever I made mistakes, and boy I sure made a lot of them, she made everything ok.

I'm miles from where I was when I first got back. I don't receive any counseling right now as opposed to most of my friends who have terrible post-traumatic stress syndrome. It's a real strange set of circumstances. They didn't have this PTSD to the extent like the soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have it. It wasn't immediate. It came on way later in life, and I can give you a good example. My friend Tony has a real good business in Kentucky. He was sitting at his desk one day, and he just started crying. He had no idea. It was uncontrollable. He went to counseling at the VA, and they ended up giving him a 100 percent disability which means that he had a business, he pretty much turned over his business to I think one of his children, and he's a lot better now. To talk to him you wouldn't know there was anything wrong with him. He does get compensation. The Veteran's Administration gave him 100 percent disability which means he gets about \$3000 a month for the rest of his life. Now my friend Frank has the same thing. His post-traumatic stress syndrome actually led to finding me. He is now 100 percent disabled. My friend Roke, he's about 75 percent. His leg is real messed up, and he has some substance abuse problems which is really hard to take. He is such a nice, sweet kid. Well, he's not a kid. He's a man. He's had two marriages. His first marriage fell apart. They had some beautiful children though. We had a great party when I went out to his house in Phoenix, too. My friend Doc, he was wounded terribly. He has a real hard time walking. He has lots of head trauma. Then there's me, and I don't have any of that, and I don't know why.



Interviewer: Can you tell me more about you though? What does combat do to an 18-year-old young man out of high school, learning how to shoot, learning how to kill? What was that like?

Hairrell: When you first experience it, it makes you physically sick. You lose control of your bowels sometimes. It's disgusting. As you get older, and you see more of this, you become very hardened and you don't give a shit about anything. You get to a point, and I remember that point, I think it was the end of January. I just said, "These guys aren't going to get me." Whatever I got to do to survive, that's what I got to do. One of the ways you survive in combat is you have to get down and dirty. You get nastier than the next person, than the people that are shooting at you. So you do whatever you have to do to survive. You have to take an attitude that it's either you or them. That's the way that I made it.

Interviewer: You said before that there were instances where you can't believe that you're still here, what were those moments?

Hairrell: We had a sergeant. These poor sergeants they take the brunt of the war. He was another guy that was, I don't even remember his name. It's really sad. We were close to this island, and we had been getting a lot of fire from this island. There were snipers all over the place. They were in these little holes called spider holes. They have a clear field to fire, but you can't see them. They can definitely see you. We were caught in this rice paddy dike area, so we were kind of trapped. We couldn't really see our way to go back, so we sent four

people over to see if they could dig out this one spider hole that was right in front of us. I remember the sergeant. I wasn't with him, but I did see what happened. He took his grenade out, pulled the pin, threw it down in the hole. He's supposed to wait a little bit. Otherwise, the guy is going to do exactly what he did. The thing came flying out right back at him, right outside the hole that he had threw it into. Nobody got hurt on that one. The sergeant eventually made it back to us, and he was right next to me and for some reason he poked his head above the dike. When he did that, he got hit right through the head, right next to me. I thought you know, I was going to do that right before he did that, but I didn't. Why I didn't do that, I don't know. During the Tet Offensive, we were in a village. I don't remember exactly where it was. There was a grenade that dropped right in back of me, and it didn't explode. I don't know why. So that's why I say I'm lucky, those were two instances right there that I have no explanation for. I'm still here.

Interviewer: Can you briefly describe the Tet Offensive?

Hairrell: The Tet Offensive in 1967 really was supposed to be a celebration of the Chinese New Year which they have every year. It's on, I believe, the 30<sup>th</sup> of January. For us, it turned out to be just horrific because they had been storing all these weapons. Then that night is when they started their attacks. That's when our warehouses got demolished. It was all my valuable pictures and everything went up in smoke. It really ticked me off. The Tet Offensive to me then made sense because of all the light action that we had had up to that point was getting ready for this. When they came out, they were all over the place.

North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, they were in every little city and village in South Vietnam. A lot of them were like suicide bombers. They came out you, and they wouldn't stop until you killed them. Now that never happened to us. It was not that severe. I remember that during that night that we were outside of Da Nang which was where most of the Marines were stationed, and boy the rockets were just pouring into that city. We knew that something was unusual. We had to do a search and destroy mission right after that. We were sent up to a place called Hué. It was at one time the capital of Vietnam. It since had moved to Saigon, but there were a lot of North Vietnamese in Hué. Unfortunately for the Marine Corps, most of those guys had to go in there and get them out. The unit that I was with, the 196th, was supposed to act as a blocking force. They were supposed to move the North Vietnamese out of Hué towards us. Well, we didn't see that many that really made it out of there. I think most of the North Vietnamese died in Hué. It took the Marines quite a long time to get them out of there. It was another lucky instance that I'd say. I'm glad I didn't have to go in there and do it. I feel really sorry for those guys that had to do that. It's hand-to-hand combat fighting. I've never had to do that. I never wanted to, and I'm not sure that I could. I don't know if somebody was that close to me. I don't know what I would do.

Interviewer: You talked about being haunted by the experiences. Was that a night that changed you with the rockets going into the city?

Hairrell: No, I think it was the fact that so many, I was in Alpha company. Company A, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry. The company that got hit was Charlie Company, 2<sup>nd</sup>

Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry. I knew a bunch of those guys. After that, that's when I got angry. I can say though that when I joined Charlie Company after that, the guys that survived it were really mean and really nasty. We would go into certain villages, and they would just start beating people up for no reason, especially older folks. That's disgusting. I got into my very first fist fight as an Army soldier because of that. Dave Choked was his name. He was so messed up in the head he shouldn't have even been out in the field anymore. He started beating up this old guy trying to get information out of him. The old guy was so old he didn't know anything. That's when he and I got into it. That just does things to your mind. I don't know. I never could, wanted to harm children. I actually never harmed anybody as far as civilians. The only people that I took my frustrations out on were who I viewed as the enemy.

Interviewer: Who was the enemy?

Hairrell: There were regular North Vietnamese soldiers called the NVA. They were battle trained. They were really good, really good fighters. Most of them I think were probably the same age that I was. There was the Viet Cong guerillas. These were the guys that, again probably were the same age as I was, that lived in the village during the day and at night would pull whatever duty they were assigned. Most of those guys, I think, moved information, and weapons and food. The North Vietnamese had to depend largely on the South Vietnamese population for their food because they couldn't carry enough. They carried little bags of rice. If you've seen films, I guess, one of the things I think they talked about was how light the North Vietnamese were able to

travel. It was amazing. They could go so far on such a small amount of food and water which made them really tough. Then there was the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese and I think that's pretty much is the only two groups that I ever faced.

Interviewer: Going back to the civilians, how often did you witness violence against civilians and destruction of villages?

Hairrell: Destruction of villages, quite often. A lot of times they burned them. Then they would take the civilians, and they would relocate them. Where they were relocated to, I have no idea. They would bring in these big helicopters, put the people on the helicopter and take them to another area. In the area that I was in, in the northern part of the country, we didn't do that a lot. We didn't really do that very much. I think most of that took place in the central and southern part of the country. I never witnessed a lot of it. It was occasional.

Interviewer: Why were villages burned?

Hairrell: Well, that's a good question. Supposedly, that wouldn't allow the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to use that village as a place to store weapons, to get their food, so they would have to go someplace else. It makes no sense. The whole damn thing didn't make any sense. The war didn't make any sense. It was just something that myself were caught up in a period of history that I was so young that I didn't know any better. I would say that if the same thing happened to me know, there's no way that I would go there. No way.

Interviewer: When did you start feeling that the war didn't make sense?

Hairrell: Probably when I had my own children. I have a daughter and a son. I had my daughter first. When she was born, it kind of changed me. I realized how precious life was. Up to that time sometimes I questioned it.

Interviewer: You said earlier that you don't remember some of you friends. Why is that?

Hairrell: I don't know. My friend Frank has the same problem I do. My friend Roke has a really good memory, and if we have questions about things we have pictures and stuff. He knows who these people are, and we don't. I don't know why. He's just amazing. His memory is amazing. Mine's not.

Interviewer: You also talk about your wife being your savior. What did she save you from?

Hairrell: Probably myself. I had some substance abuse problems, not anything that I considered severe, but enough where I considered myself kind of lazy. She convinced me that there was a lot more to me maybe than I thought I had in me. She made it such that I felt like I could be a good person, and I had something to offer.

Interviewer: Why didn't you feel like you could be a good person?

Hairrell: I don't know. I think because of some of the things that had happened to me in the past. When I was in some classes at Western, I noticed that some people treat you a little differently. That bothered me.

Interviewer: I feel a little uncomfortable asking this, but why did you use drugs and alcohol?

Hairrell: They were there. One of the things that we used to do when we'd go through villages is we'd look for marijuana. There was a lot of it. If you found it in the villages, it's free. If you get it from the rear area, you have to pay for it, so we were always looking for some extra. It calmed us down. You didn't know if you were going to make it from one day to the next, so you really didn't care too much. The alcohol was provided by the Army. It was in the form of beer. It wasn't hard liquor. If you were in a pretty safe area, they would helicopter a whole bunch of beer and sodas out to us in big garbage cans filled with ice. You're supposed to only get two to three beers per person, but some of those guys didn't drink, so they would just give them to you. If you walked through our perimeter at night sometimes, I would imagine 90 percent of the guys were asleep because they were either drunk or stoned. That's the truth.

Interviewer: I've also heard about this thing called fragging. Did that ever happen in your experience?

Hairrell: I've heard of it, and I heard one of my friends with the last name of Adams was sent to prison because he tried to do that to a lieutenant. If that happened, it was after I switched companies. I was in Alpha Company, and he stayed in Alpha Company. I went to Charlie Company, and I heard rumors that he had done that. Knowing Adams at the time, he had a real quick temper. I can

imagine somebody must have made him real mad. I don't know if he was successful or not.

Interviewer: Earlier you said that you remember the day you left Vietnam vividly. Can you tell me about that day?

Hairrell: The day that I left? Oh, absolutely. In fact, I can go back just a couple days before that, a week before that. I had been on what they called an in-country R&R which means they fly you out of wherever you are. You come back to your base camp, put on clean clothes and you have three days of vacation. There were places in South Vietnam that were just gorgeous. This one particular place was called Vũng Tàu. It's now a huge resort area. If you Google it, you'll see what I mean. I spent three days there. When I came back, I thought I had to go back out into the field for my last week in country, but there was a supply sergeant that I had been talking to. He said, "You know, the guy that maintains what they call the emergency perimeter sirens that are supposed to go off when you get hit or attacked or anything, you're supposed to make sure the sirens go on." So, you have to stay up all night to do this. I got that job. So, I didn't have to go back out in the field. I knew then I was going to go home, but of course I didn't stay awake all night. I partied all day, as hard as I could, with as many people as I could with, and I slept at night. So if the rockets came in, I have no idea. But the last day that I was there, all the guys from my squad in Charlie Company, who I was in charge of at the time then because I was the squad leader, they came to see me off at the airport in Da Nang. I remember looking out, and there was this giant jet that was there.



That was my ticket home. When we got on the plane, the stewardesses were civilians. It was a long ride back to Seattle. That's where we landed. We stopped in Hawaii for a layover for a little bit, so I did get to go to Hawaii once in my life. I think it was for four hours. I haven't been there since, unfortunately. Then we landed in Seattle, and then from Seattle I went to Chicago.

Interviewer: Can you give me a comparison of when you first got to Vietnam, like the scenery, and compare that to when things started getting uglier?

Hairrell: When you first land there, you land in a real safe area. I landed in a place called Cam Ranh Bay which was a huge Navy and Air Force facility, just like being in Champaign-Urbana. It was a beautiful, huge bay. It was just full of crystal-clear water. The food there was really good. The Air Force really had some guys that knew how to cook. You stay there when you come in country until you get assigned a unit. As soon as you get assigned a unit, it takes about two days, then you take a helicopter or a plane, depending on where you are going. I took a helicopter up to the northern part of the country, and that's where I met my friend Frank and Tony and all these other guys that were there. I was the new guy. They were called FNGs. I won't tell you what the F stands for, but the new N stands for new, and the G is guy. You could probably figure out the rest. As soon as I went out on my first patrol, it was like from a safe area, and there was what I pictured that Vietnam would be like. It was rice paddies. It was little villages, lots of palm trees. It was really pretty, but I was so scared. I remember carrying the weapon that I had was an

M-16. I remember that you have a safety on your weapon, and I remember I had my thumb on that safety and my finger on the trigger. I was going to be quick enough to pull that safety off and fire that weapon if I had to.

Fortunately, I didn't have to. I'll never forget that first patrol that I had. It was just short, nothing happened, came back. It was just fine.

Interviewer: Fast forwarding, when you came to the University of Illinois what was it like? Did you have support?

Hairrell: When I came to the University of Illinois, I was married, and my daughter had just been born. I got into the industrial technology program, and I didn't hang around with any other students. I do remember being in a math class at Altgeld Hall. I was way older than all the students in there. Most of those kids were nineteen years old, I think. They were freshmen. I had to take, I don't know if it was trigonometry, some math class that I took that I found incredibly difficult. I had no idea what was going on, but somehow I passed. That was the hardest class I took. I didn't really hang around with any of the kids because I didn't have anything in common with them. My whole goal was to finish in two years and get a teaching job, and then leave.

Interviewer: Did people support the war at the university at this time?

Hairrell: At that time, it was over with. It had ended in 1975.

Interviewer: What about at Western?

Hairrell: You know; I think it was a pretty conservative area in Macomb. It's a beautiful little town in the west-central part of Illinois. Other than the veterans' organization which we were considered liberals I guess. The people that hung around with us kind of thought like we did. I think most of townspeople were pretty conservative. Although, you know generally around universities people are a little more liberal than the rural populations are. I remember we had one parade that we marched in, and it was called the Vietnam Veterans Against the War parade. Whether we were for or against it didn't make a difference. We just marched in the parade. They needed a group of people to do it. It was a small town, so we volunteered and we did that. That was the last I heard of anything. We did have a good time. We had this one particular bar in Macomb, Illinois that we used to hang out in. Most of the veterans did, so we all met there when we were done. One thing leads to another, and you have a party.

Interviewer: Did you ever encounter anyone that was against it?

Hairrell: Oh, sure. A lot of the students that I had in my first English class when I went to school there. I'd say almost every single one of them were. I remember the name of the English teacher. Her name was Mercer. She sat on her desk, and she wanted to talk about the Vietnam War. She knew I was a vet. She didn't know exactly what I did in the war, but most of their comments were directed towards me.

Interviewer: What did they say?

Hairrell: They wanted to know if I had killed any children. I remember that question. I got up and walked out of class and never went back. I took an F for the course.

Interviewer: Were there any other moments like that?

Hairrell: No, that was the most vivid one. I remember after that I went in and tried to get into another class, but it was too late in the semester. Well, they had quarters there. It was too late in the quarter, so my hours dropped down. You have to take a full load in order to receive benefits from the Veterans' Administration, the GI bill. I think I had dropped down below full-time, so I took a cut in pay.

Interviewer: Do you have an inspirational story or a moment of hope about your experience in Vietnam?

Hairrell: I never thought about it as being a struggle of right versus wrong. I always thought it was a struggle of me versus them.

Interviewer: Who were "them"?

Hairrell: The people that were my enemies at the time. Come to find out later in life they probably were not because they just wanted freedom for their country. It would be the same if somebody came into our country and tried to tell us what to do. I think that's the way they felt.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to say that you haven't talked about?

Hairrell: Certainly, I'd like to tell you a little bit about the Veterans' Administration, and I'll keep it short. I have a Purple Heart. I thought I'd show you this. This is what they give you when you get wounded, but the story of my Purple Heart is a little different because when I actually thought I had been wounded and had received a Purple Heart, and I went to get benefits from the VA on my DD2-14 form. There was never any mention of a Purple Heart. There were lots of other medals and all these things that you do throughout your Army career, and I never really paid any attention to it. I come to find out that if you have one of these, you get free healthcare for the rest of your life. In the VA, they give you classifications, a one through six. If it's a classification of 6, 5 or 4 it means you have to pay some amount towards your healthcare. If you have a 3, 2 or 1, it's free. This little baby right here makes you a class three which means you get healthcare, but I was wounded by friendly fire not from the North Vietnamese at this particular time. They didn't award Purple Hearts to friendly fire recipients until I believe it was 1984, I think. Congress reversed that law, and because of certain situations I received this. That's how I came to get my Purple Heart. I had to appeal to the Department of the Army, and they did a review. It took a year. They not only sent me this. They sent me a whole bunch more medals. I have no idea what they are and what they stand for. I just have them. The Veteran's Administration did me favor and awarded me my class three certification, so that allows me to get healthcare.

Interviewer: The Veterans' Administration did you a favor with that Purple Heart, but didn't you earn that Purple Heart?

Hairrell: I feel I earned it, more ways than one. I actually all that time thought I'd had one, that I had been given one. My little brother has a bunch of my medals that he's kept, and there's a Bronze Star and a Meritorious Service Medal that they give you. A whole bunch of other little ribbons, you see on this thing they give you a little ribbon. I never really thought about it that much until I needed some healthcare, and I've got these hearing aids that I have in. When I was up in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, there was an older gentleman that I was friends with. In fact, he was my neighbor. I had talked to him about hearing aids, and he said, "Well if you're a veteran and you have a Purple Heart, your hearing aids are free." He said, "But you have to go to this office in Eau Claire to have them help you with that. You have to have an advocate. I did that, and they started the paperwork rolling. Then I received this after they did my review for a year. You know, you shouldn't have to have to get wounded, and it doesn't matter how you're wounded, to get free healthcare. I think if you're a veteran and you served your country, I think you should be able to get.

Interviewer: I remember before you said the military gives out medals like candy. What do you mean by that?

Hairrell: Well, it seems like whenever there's an action, they outline these different battles that you're in. They have medals if you do something or even if you just survive that particular battle. Your name goes on a list, and you're awarded a bunch of medals. If you look at the generals in our armed forces, you notice that on their chest they've got all these ribbons and everything. Now, that's why I say they hand them out like candy because these generals a

lot of them haven't been through combat, some have. It's just like well ok you're a general and you have to have this many ribbons on your chest. That's kind of the way I view it. It's pretty silly. The whole thing is kind of silly, but that's just my personal opinion.

Interviewer: So you think some of them are undeserved?

Hairrell: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Interviewer: Have you met any people of Vietnamese descent here in the U.S.? If so, what was it like?

Hairrell: Yes, I have a good friend of mine at the YMCA. He is half-Vietnamese. His dad was in the South Vietnamese Army. He was there for three years. Blanchard is his name. He is an Iraqi War veteran. In fact, he's in Vietnam right now as we speak. He goes back every year for about six weeks. He told me one of the times that we worked out together that if you ever want to go back there and visit he said, "I will go with you." My friend Frank wants to go back to the exact place where he was severely wounded. He held on to Sergeant Cumbie when he died. He thinks maybe that will give him some closure. I don't agree with that. Well, for one I've looked on Google maps. I had this little map that I showed you, pointed out some things before. If you look on Google, those places aren't there anymore. The names are all different. I think it'd be very difficult to find that particular spot. If I thought, if he just went back there just to view where he thought things happened like

that, I would go with him. My wife told me that. She said, "You should both go." That's probably still up in the air, but I doubt if it will ever happen.

Interviewer: I remember you saying yesterday that you don't watch war movies. Why not?

Hairrell: I can't handle them. I don't like seeing people get hurt. This makes me start crying, so I just stay away from them.

Interviewer: What would you consider your greatest regret in Vietnam?

Hairrell: My biggest regret was not all the guys that I had come home with us. I wish we all could have come together in one mass, have a big party, put us on a big boat. That's my biggest regret.

Interviewer: What's your greatest triumph?

Hairrell: I survived.