

Interview with Joseph LaHood

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Interviewer: H. Wayne Wilson

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LaHood: Joseph LaHood. I live here in Peoria, Illinois, on Parkridge Drive.

Wilson: And LaHood is spelled?

LaHood: L-a-capital-H-o-o-d.

Wilson: And a little bit about your youth, where did you go to school? What were you interested in?

LaHood: Well, I grew up in the south end of Peoria, like a lot of us did. I went to St. Joseph Grade School until third grade when they closed, transferred to St. Patrick, graduated from St. Patrick in eighth grade. Went to Spalding for a

year or thereabouts, and from Spalding I went to Manual, Central and Woodruff. And you could say I was just having a lot of fun in high school and trying to find my way through.

Wilson: Four years and four schools?

LaHood: Four years and four schools. I never graduated high school.

Wilson: And never graduated high school?

LaHood: Never graduated high school. I've got, since then, I've gone to college. I have two degrees in college.

Wilson: We'll get to that in just a moment.

LaHood: All right.

Wilson: When you say you went to four different high schools, why was that? Was your family moving? Were you just?

LaHood: No. As I said, I was having too much fun. I was asked to leave Spalding, and from Spalding I went to Manual. Spent some time there, very brief. I was asked to leave Manual. I went to Central next, spent some time there, and from there I went to Woodruff and literally spent three hours in Woodruff and was asked to leave.

Wilson: And so how far did you get in high school at that point?

LaHood: I'm gonna guess sophomore year.

Wilson: So you had a couple of years over a four year period of time or so?

LaHood: Yes, yes.

Wilson: And then, once you left Woodruff High School in Peoria, what was next?

LaHood: I joined the Marine Corps. I was seventeen years old, and so I joined the Marine Corps at seventeen.

Wilson: Was there a particular goal in mind? Or was it just, "I've run out of options. The Marine Corps is probably it."

LaHood: I've run out of options. And the Marine Corps was it.

Wilson: So you go into the Marine Corps, and you go to basic training where?

LaHood: Camp Pendleton, California.

Wilson: And at that point, you've finished basic, does the Marine Corps have AIT like the Army?

LaHood: They do. They do.

Wilson: So you went to AIT training?

LaHood: Yes.

Wilson: And that was for what?

LaHood: Infantry training. It's basic infantry training is what it is. It's six weeks long and basically it's done in California. Just ground pounders, just to learn what

infantry training is all about. It's to learn what an infantryman does. How he lives, how he works out in the jungles, how he works out in the hills, how he carries himself, what he carries, how he survives. That's what the whole thing was about.

Wilson: And then you went ahead and learned about supply?

LaHood: From there, I went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. I spent four weeks there, learning about supply. My MOS was, they call it, 3041, which was supplies. So that's where I went.

Wilson: And after Camp Lejeune, did you ship out?

LaHood: Nope. I went to Quantico, Virginia, spent a year at Quantico. Quantico is the showplace of the Marine Corps. They train officers there. So I spent little less than a year training officers and working with officers. From there, I was transferred to Cherry Point, spent couple of months in Cherry Point, and from there I was shipped out to Vietnam in December of 1970.

Wilson: And on your orders, what were you supposed to be doing when you got to Vietnam?

LaHood: Supplies, yes.

Wilson: Did any of that apply when you got to the country?

LaHood: Very little. I had what they call a supply hut, okay. And that's where things were at, in this very small place. And you did that during the daytime, and you

did other things you needed to do. Everybody was an infantryman in Vietnam, when needed. And so I said '70, actually I was there in '69. I'm sorry.

December of '69 is when I went to Vietnam.

Wilson: And you were based where?

LaHood: I started out being based at a place called LZ Ross, and it was just a little bitty hill about thirty-five, forty miles south of Da Nang. And it was big enough, when I say a hill, it was big enough to maybe get a half a dozen tents on that hill and a supply hut and maybe a few trucks, and that was about it. And it was surrounded by concertina wire – that was our perimeter.

Wilson: And you eventually, I mean, you took care of the supply hut, but eventually you evolved into actually being on patrol?

LaHood: Yes. Either day patrol, but primarily night patrol. Those who had daytime jobs, such as, whether you're liaison, whether you're supply or armory, you'd go on patrols usually at night cause your infantrymen were out there during the daytime, and so you would just augment the operation at nighttime.

Wilson: Could you share with us what night patrol involved?

LaHood: You'd wait until it was dark before you would go out, and usually it's six to nine men that went out. You would go to a predestined spot, and if you were going to set up an ambush, you would just sit somewhere, usually it's in the middle of a rice paddy. And you would set up perimeters for an ambush. If it

was strictly patrolling, you would go out and you would walk certain areas for four or five hours, trying to flush the enemy out.

Wilson: How often did this occur? How long were you out?

LaHood: Night patrol happened every night, as long as there were people capable of doing it. And you were out anywhere till three, four o'clock in the morning. You would try to come back in before daylight. The idea was you didn't want the enemy to see where you were going out nor how you were coming in.

Wilson: When you talk about being on a hill, and just having maybe six tents, a supply hut, etc., how many men were based there?

LaHood: Less than two hundred. Yeah, it was less than two hundred.

Wilson: Were you subject to attack from Viet Cong or North Vietnamese?

LaHood: Well, we were subject to attack, and that's why the concertina wire, and every night men would be in fox holes around the perimeter of the LZ. LZ stood for landing zone. So this hill was used for a helicopter landing zone, is primarily what it was used for. But we were there to protect it and to protect the area, is what our goal was.

Wilson: What kind of attacks did you come under?

LaHood: Usually it was foot soldiers coming in and/or mortars. They're very good with mortars, and they would lob mortars in on us, and/or, as I say, foot soldiers trying to get through the concertina wire.

Wilson: Did you have to engage them on occasion?

LaHood: On occasion with the concertina wire. Engaging mortars, you'd take cover, try to figure out where their mortars were, and then lob some back at them. Coming in through the concertina wire, they had what they call sappers. And they were individuals, small, and they could come through concertina wire without making any noise. And concertina wire, we usually had tin cans hung, with rocks or marbles or, just so, when they shook, they would make noises, and you'd have hundreds of these cans. And these sappers, as they call them, they could come through and not shake a can. That's how good they were at it.

Wilson: And the sapper had bandoliers?

LaHood: Bandoliers, ammunition. Clothing was usually a loincloth very tightly wrapped around their groin area. The rest of them was usually charcoal dark so that they could get through.

Wilson: Were you ever injured in Vietnam?

LaHood: I was never injured.

Wilson: And how long did you serve there?

LaHood: A year and a half total. Well, yeah, a year and a half, from December '69 through May of '71.

Wilson: So you extended?

LaHood: I extended.

Wilson: For a six-month tour.

LaHood: I did.

Wilson: Why did you choose to do that?

LaHood: When I rotated out the first time, which would've been December of 1970, if you had eighteen months or less, left in the Marine Corps, they were giving you an early discharge out. So I thought, "Well, I'd like to get an early discharge out." So therefore, I re-upped to go back the second time, thinking when I would rotate out the second time, I would have less than eighteen months. Well, shortly thereafter, they decided they'd cut the numbers low enough, and no matter what happens, there are no more early outs. So I ended up spending another six months in Vietnam.

Wilson: I'd like to talk about the patrols once again, in terms of, was there a point in time where you, I suppose you were nervous every time you went out?

LaHood: Every time.

Wilson: Was there a point in time where you thought this isn't good?

LaHood: A couple of times. Times especially when we would lose contact with the rear because our radios would break down, and/or we would feel like we were going to be outnumbered. As we were hiding, and as we'd see Viet Cong go by, the question is do you engage them, or do you not? If we were

outnumbered, we would not engage them. If we were outnumbered, we just wanted to hold the status quo and hope they pass by. At those points in times, yes, you start wondering what's going on.

Wilson: Did you lose any of your fellow men at the landing zone?

LaHood: Yeah, we lost a couple men at the landing zone, yes, either because of incoming mortars and/or patrols, yes.

Wilson: As you look back at that period of time, how do you think that has impacted your life as a whole?

LaHood: One of the things I didn't, it took me years. I was discharged out of the Marine Corps in 1972. I was married in October of '72, and thinking life goes on as normal. And suddenly there came a time in my life, shortly thereafter, where I come to realize the things I saw, experienced, did and felt would impact me the rest of my life. Not sure why, but I suddenly realized that. It has had an impact me, the rest of my life. I spent almost fourteen years in therapy. I started therapy about, I was out of the Marine Corps in '72, I started therapy in late '73, not knowing why I was going to therapy. I just knew something was wrong. And it took years for the right therapist to figure out why we need to go where we need to go. As most therapists, they dig into your past, especially childhood, and it's like, okay, what happened. Well, that wasn't childhood. Well, we were lost as to where we go from there. And it was a Catholic priest, who was a therapist at the time, who suddenly one day asked me to say, "Tell me about Vietnam." So I told him about Vietnam. And

toward the end, he suddenly realized, all I had was good stories. And so he looked at me, and he said, "So nothing bad ever happened to you?" And I said, "Oh, no. Nothing, nothing bad." And he says, "We're going to walk through this." So he explained over the next period of whatever time, and it was a couple years, we would walk through Vietnam every day. And he assured me that, "You're going to see things that you'd forgotten." And I, like a lot of other guys, buried everything. And forgot about it.

Wilson: Bad things had happened.

LaHood: Bad things had happened.

Wilson: You came back from Vietnam. You married. Did not have a high school diploma at the time.

LaHood: Did not.

Wilson: So what did you do in terms of preparing yourself for the future?

LaHood: Well, there was a restaurant in town called Famous Recipe Fried Chicken back then, and so I went to work there, frying chicken. And one Wednesday, about a year after I started this, I decided it's time to start to school. So I went over to ICC [Illinois Central College], stood in line, and decided I'm going to go to ICC. So I had a catalogue, I never forget it, and I can still remember the page numbers, page number fifty-four, and it was computer science. And I thought, "That's what I want to be. I'm going to learn about computers." So I signed up just like everybody else did. And I signed up for twenty-one

semester hours, thinking that's full time. School starts. Partway through school, I get called into the office, and they're explaining to me that I'd lied on my application. And I begged to pardon, and I says, "I didn't lie on the application." And they say, "Well, you don't have a high school degree." And I says, "That is true." "Well, you had to have lied." I says, "I beg to pardon. I didn't lie." So they finally found my files, and they said, "No, you circled ninth or tenth grade." And I says, "Cause I'm not sure where I'm at, ninth or tenth grade, so I circled both of them." And it was a dean, and he says, "So you didn't lie." I say, "No, I didn't." He said, "You can't stay here." And I says, "Why? I'm carrying twenty hours. I'm acing it. Why can't I stay here?" Dialogue goes back and forth. Finally, what it came down to, after a couple of meetings, is, "We'll allow you to stay here as long as you maintain a B." And so they allowed me to stay and receive my associate's degree in computer science, as long as I maintained my B.

Wilson: May I ask if you ever got a high school diploma?

LaHood: Yes, a couple of years later, maybe a year later. I transferred to Bradley, and I applied to McDonnell Douglas. They had a vision here in Peoria at the time. So I put the application in McDonnell Douglas, and John Schlinker's the man's name, and he says, "Joe, you need a high school degree to get in here." I says, "John, I've got an associate's. I'm working towards my undergrad." He says, "You've got to have a high school degree." I says, "Well, I'll go back and get a GED." Took me six times before I passed my GED, but I finally

passed the GED, and so that's my high school diploma. So I got an associate's first, picked up a GED, then I picked up my undergrad.

Wilson: During this period of time, you're going through some sort of counseling.

LaHood: A lot of counseling.

Wilson: Did that impact your education at all?

LaHood: It did not. No.

Wilson: You were able to keep those two things separate.

LaHood: Yes.

Wilson: Were you burying Vietnam, do you think?

LaHood: Oh yeah, I was burying Vietnam. And that's how I kept them separate. I learned to bury things very well. I think once, when we go through traumatic situations, we learn to bury. That's how we survive. And so things we went through over there, and I say we, I and a bunch of the other guys, we would bury what we didn't want to face reality with.

Wilson: An example of what you were trying to bury?

LaHood: You know, seeing other guys, I mean, you know, war is, one of the, I think, one of the purposes and goals of war is rather than kill someone, they would rather maim them because of the psychological impact it has on them and those around them. So they were very good at doing that with different things.

So as you'd see men get hurt, okay, for one thing, you'd wonder, when's your turn? When is it coming next? So I'd bury that. The other thing I buried quite well was, in supply, we would, as individuals would get hurt and they would be shipped out of country back home, we would get their personal effects. And we would have to go through their personal effects and inventory it, and then pack it up and send it back to their loved ones. And that's one of the things that I did for a couple of months.

Wilson: When you went on a patrol, in addition to discovering the enemy, did you discover any of their, maybe their, where their camp was? Or where they had stored some items?

LaHood: Not so much camp, but the other thing we discovered was tunnels. So we would have to go down to the tunnels and try to find, and usually that's where their storage was, is what we discovered, and that's primarily what troops, soldiers would look for is, what do they have down there? And it was usually ammunition, is where they would store their ammunition is in the tunnels.

Wilson: Did you have to go down in the tunnels?

LaHood: Yeah. I weighed less than a hundred pounds, so I was a prime candidate for a tunnel rat.

Wilson: And when you went down, what were you thinking?

LaHood: You'd think a lot. You had no idea what you're gonna run into. You had a flashlight and it had a lens on it. And the lens had probably a hole about the

size of a pin, so that was your beam, was that pinhole. And you see either, usually, red or green. Sometimes you down, only spend a few minutes down there cause it went nowhere. Other times you could spend ten, fifteen minutes looking around and trying to find whatever it is.

Wilson: How did you know that no one was down, or were there people down there?

LaHood: You didn't know. You had, usually you went down with a .45 and a flashlight, and that's what you had for protection.

Wilson: Did you ever confront the enemy?

LaHood: Never. I thank God every day, never.

Wilson: Let's come back to America. You have a degree.

LaHood: I do.

Wilson: From Bradley University, in what?

LaHood: In computer science.

Wilson: In computer science.

LaHood: Yes.

Wilson: You go out and find a job?

LaHood: I did. I worked for McDonnell Douglas for seven years. From there I went to a company called HBO & Company, not Home Box Office. It was HBO &

Company. They installed computers in hospitals nationwide. And so I went to work for them for seven years.

Wilson: You had a change of heart, may I call it?

LaHood: The change of heart came probably in '83, '84. About 1983, 1984 is when I had the change of heart.

Wilson: What happened?

LaHood: I found my faith again. I found God. God found me.

Wilson: You had grown up in the Catholic faith?

LaHood: As a Catholic, sure.

Wilson: Did you lose your faith because of Vietnam?

LaHood: I did. I didn't practice my faith after I came back from Vietnam. I'd lost my faith. I went to church. My wife was Catholic. So I went through the motions, but again, they were motions. And those of us who came back from Vietnam, we learned how to go through motions with no feelings. You can hide your feelings very well. And you have to survive so you have to put on, as I call it, you put a front on. And you go out and you're with everybody else.

Wilson: You became callous in Vietnam?

LaHood: Very callous. You learn that Vietnam, one of the things we learned is life has no meaning in Vietnam. You try to hold onto your own life as long as you

can, but after a while, you suddenly realize there's no meaning for you in Vietnam neither. It's just a matter of time. So you do become callous.

Wilson: Too many other people dying, being hurt.

LaHood: Right. Being hurt. The hurt is the worst part. The dying is bad, yes it is. But watching them go through the hurt.

Wilson: Was your wife of support during this period of time post-Vietnam up to '83?

LaHood: Very much so. I couldn't never done it without her. So yeah, she stood by me.

Wilson: And then in '83, what did you decide to do?

LaHood: I was on a Cursillo weekend, is what it was. It's a retreat type weekend the Catholic Church puts on. And I've heard a lot about it over the years. What's funny is people tried to tell me to go there for years, and I kept saying no, no, no. And so I did. I went there. And that was where I changed.

Wilson: I'd call that more than change.

LaHood: Believe me, it was. Yes.

Wilson: Take me from the Cursillo weekend to the transition.

LaHood: Transition of?

Wilson: In terms of your profession.

LaHood: Well, my profession continued. I mean, when you say profession, I continued being a computer geek. That just continued. I got closer to God when I had this change of heart. I got closer to my family. I was a workaholic. I suddenly realized I don't need to be a workaholic anymore. There were other things in life. I started looking out around me to see what else there was in life. We had no children yet. We had been married, we got married in 1972. We had no children yet. We wanted children. I started thinking about being a deacon in the church for the first time, and where that came from, I have no idea. But it was there.

Wilson: And that's what I mean by profession.

LaHood: Yeah. Yes.

Wilson: You have taken your faith beyond just faith.

LaHood: Yes, I have.

Wilson: Tell me about what you do now.

LaHood: I've been a deacon now for eighteen years. I do prison ministry. So we have about nine prisons in the Peoria Diocese that I visit periodically. When I say periodically, monthly on some of them. We do cursillos in the prisons. I'm a deacon at Holy Family Catholic Church. I'm also a deacon at St. Mary's, the cathedral. And I'm a deacon at St. Sharbel Catholic Church here in Peoria. I teach what they call RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults] for those

wanting to come into the Catholic Church, so I teach that, starting September through the time of Easter.

Wilson: Looking back at your service in Vietnam and then coming back and burying everything, you, would you consider yourself a little bit lost, and now you have found yourself?

LaHood: Coming back, I was lost. And probably until '83, '84 I was lost. And the deaconate program, the deaconate community gave me a purpose, a purpose I never had before. Work was not fulfilling. You needed it because of a job, but was it truly fulfilling? The answer's no. I think one of the best jobs that I enjoyed was, I worked for OSF HealthCare here in Peoria, Illinois. I did that for twenty-five years, twenty-four years. And that's probably as close to a faith community that I could possibly get, and still have a job. And that was probably one of the better things that ever happened to me.

Wilson: You're Lebanese.

LaHood: I am Lebanese.

Wilson: And the Lebanese community in the greater Peoria area is very dedicated to service.

LaHood: They are.

Wilson: What role did being Lebanese and your fellow Lebanese play in any aspect of your life?

LaHood: After, during, whatever?

Wilson: In terms of serving in Vietnam, and then afterwards?

LaHood: They were, they supported, support was mail. Support was packages. Not only from my family, but yeah, the extended family. I would get things. When I came back, when I would rotate back, they were there for me. They were supporting me. The thing is, no one knew how to support us cause we didn't know what kind of support we needed. And so could I look at someone and say, "This is what I need." I couldn't look at you and tell you what I needed. When I came back to Peoria the first time in December, the first time I rotated out, I got to the airport about five o'clock in the evening. I had no money on me. I was sitting in uniform. I had a duffel bag. And I had no money to call anybody. I didn't know how I was going to get home. So I sat, I'll never forget that, I sat next to a phone, I don't know, for a couple of hours. And finally, somebody asked me, "Are you all right?" And I say, "I'm fine." And they says, "Do you need a ride home?" I say, "Well, if I could borrow a dime, I could call somebody. But I don't have any money." They gave me a ride home. But I didn't know to ask somebody, I needed whatever. And why, I didn't know, I don't know that. But again, I was burying a lot of things.

Wilson: People who haven't been in the service, in a warzone, don't understand the warzone.

LaHood: That's true. That's true. Never understand it.

Wilson: And sometimes, we who have been in a warzone don't understand the impact of the warzone.

LaHood: And that is true. We still don't understand.

Wilson: Now that you've had several decades to reflect back, you went through counseling, which was helpful, you found your faith. Do you look back on your service in Vietnam a little bit differently than while you were there, or immediately afterward?

LaHood: I do. It made me who I am today. It was part of my growth that I had to go through for whatever reason. I truly believe that what we experience in our path of life has a meaning. And it's to fulfill something else, whether it's to help someone else, whether it's to help a situation, but God does not put us in situations that we may dislike just to put us there. He wants us to be happy. But because of the human element of this world, we create, as a whole, our own situation sometimes. And so I believe that, yeah, I do look at it differently.

Wilson: And let me expand on that just a bit, if you will allow me. When you were over there, I mean, God is a loving entity. And yet when you were in Vietnam, did you see God loving anybody?

LaHood: I did not.

Wilson: How do you?

LaHood: I did not.

Wilson: When you look back, how do you justify everything that happened over there?

LaHood: I can't. I can't justify what happened. And I'll never try to justify it. God was there, but we weren't there for God, is what it comes down to, cause God is always there. It's just that we don't recognize Him. We don't see the situation that He's in.

Wilson: Are you a better person because you served in Vietnam?

LaHood: I think so, yes. An example, I'll give you an example. I went through depression, naturally, when I came back. And depression to me is what I call the bottomless pit. You just fall, and it's a free fall, and you keep falling. And you pray you're going to hit that bottom so you can at least start crawling back up, and as you don't find that bottom, you just grow, go inside of yourself and shun out everybody else. You put this mask around you. You build a wall around you. So I went through that for a period of time. And I'd ask myself, "Why?" And I'd ask God, "Why? Why in the hell am I going through this? I've paid the price. I've done what I can do. Why?" Years later, a young lady walked in my office one day, and she expressed to me that she was totally depressed and needed help. And a light bulb went on. And that light bulb was, this is why I went through what I went through back here, my own depression, so I can help somebody else. So we sat and we talked. And her response to me was, "No one has ever understood this." I looked at her and say, "You're right." Unless you go through it, you can't understand it.

Wilson: So your service in Vietnam actually was preparing you for what you're doing today.

LaHood: Exactly. Seeing the guys, you know, I do a lot of prison ministry. I was just there this morning. I can't envision what they go through day-to-day. But as I tell them, my prison was a year and a half in Vietnam. I counted the days, the weeks, the hours, the minutes, whatever it was. And I says, "You know, the only thing you can hold on to is hope. That's the one thing I think I held on to was hope I will get out of here one day. That's all you guys can hold on to is hope you'll get out of these prisons." And I express to them, they're there for a purpose. They're there to be punished, but they're there for other purposes. They can build a community. I've seen Christian communities grow out of prison, truly have seen Christian communities come out of prisons.

Wilson: They can relate, the inmates can relate to you because of the Vietnam experience?

LaHood: For some reason the answer is yes. I can talk more openly to them because of it. And as I keep telling them, I'm not trying to say I understand what you're going through cause I'd never do that to you, cause yours is different. Mine was different. But I can relate to I've got time, I've got time to do, and I want this time to get over. I never want to see it again. And I says, from that aspect, I can hear it. So, again, I think that prepared me for this.

Wilson: Joe LaHood, thank you.

LaHood: Thank you.