A Veterans Oral History

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Narrator

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Interviewer

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JS: **My name is Jim Svobodny. My address is 201 38th Avenue Circle South, Moorhead, Minnesota and I'm a veteran of the Vietnam War.**

LJ: Where were you born?

JS: **In Fargo.**

LJ: Who are your parents and what did they do?

JS: **My parents were Frank and Lila Svobodny. My father had several jobs, but his primary job was working for the Great Northern Railroad as a telegrapher. And he also worked part time as a bookkeeper and worked in a gas station as a mechanic on weekends.**

LJ: He was busy.

JS: **Yes, my mother – my father is deceased - and my mother is still living. She's 81. She lives in Fargo and she's basically been what you call a homemaker.**

LJ: Where did you go to high school?

JS: **I went to Fargo Central High School in Fargo, which no longer exists. We were the Fargo Central Midgets – not politically correct anymore. And that school actually burned down in about 1965 or '66 after I had, you know, had finished so it no longer exists.**

LJ: Did you go on to college?

JS: **Yes, I did. I went to North Dakota State University and got a bachelor's degree there in psychology and sociology and then later on to graduate school at the University of Nebraska and got a master's degree in social work.**

LJ: So that's what you did prior to entering the military, you were in college?

JS: **I was in college and I had one year after I left college before I was called on to active duty and I was a social worker during that time on the Turtle**

Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota. I'd gone through the ROTC Program in college; and so, I was commissioned a second lieutenant when I graduated. But they didn't take me on active duty right away because I was assigned to the Military Police Corps. And they had their quota of MP Lieutenants at that moment, so they gave me about a year before they'd take me, and that's when I worked for a year at the Turtle Mountain Reservation.

LJ: What was your military training like?

JS: Well, of course I had four years of Reserve Officer Training Corps at NDSU; and I had military science classes and drills and a summer camp for six weeks at Fort Lewis, Washington, now which was the equivalent of basic training. Then after I got my commission they sent me, when I was called on to active duty, for three months to the Basic School for Military Police Officers. And so I joined a class of 50 who were there, who were all commissioned second lieutenants; and when we graduated at the end of three months, 48 of the 50 of us got orders for Vietnam.

LJ: How did you feel about that?

JS: Well, I kind of suspected it was going to happen. That's the way everything was going back in the middle '60s.

LJ: So you went overseas to Vietnam?

JS: Yes.

LJ: What was your first impression once you got there?

JS: Well, let me give you a little background. I grew up as a young boy during the Korean War, and I had a couple of older cousins who were in the Korean War. And there were family stories as I was a young boy about all of the killing and so forth over there. Both of my cousins came home pretty badly shot up with a lot of shrapnel in their bodies. And so, as a young boy, I had nightmares about going to war and getting killed. And it just – my worst fear was that I would end up in a war. And, that's probably the reason why I went through the ROTC Program because I figured I'd go anyway. And I might as well go as an officer.

LJ: And get some benefits?

JS: Get some benefits and also perhaps have a little bit more say over my own destiny, although very few people have very much say in wartime. So when I actually left the country, I left San Francisco on the airplane and it was at nighttime, and I saw the lights of San Francisco as we flew out and over the ocean into the darkness, I really believed that that was the last time I ever would see the United States. You know I just had this premonition that it was my fate that I would go to war and die, you know. So that was sort of a backdrop for this.

So when I finally arrived in Vietnam as we were flying over the country to the Bien Hoa Air Base, just outside of what is now Ho Chi Minh City and used to be called Saigon. It was daytime and I could see the canopy of trees and the plush vegetation and everything. And I kept thinking to myself, why are we flying so low? I don't want to get shot down before we even land. So entering the country was a real scary thing for me.

LJ: Tell us about some of the people you met once you got there.

JS: Oh.

LJ: The commanding officers.

JS: Yes, it's hard to know where to start and you have to realize that I returned from Vietnam 32 years ago … actually this month. And so, my memory of a lot of that is pretty foggy and there's a lot of it that, I mean, I just haven't had an opportunity to talk about during all this time. And so, you know it isn't like that I've got all these fresh stories in my mind, but I can tell you a little bit about my initial experiences.

I was assigned to a sentry dog unit. I can't even remember the number of the company anymore. Most World War II veterans can tell you which unit they belonged to. I'm not even sure. I don't even know. It was something. But the headquarters were in Cam Ranh Bay; and I had to take actually a jeep from near Saigon at the processing station where I landed at Bien Hoa Air Base to Cam Ranh Bay. It was up the coast a ways in Vietnam, which in and of itself was a very scary ride. Because it was the first time in country and you hear all about this guerrilla warfare and the enemy could be anyplace, and there were all kinds of ambushes and land mines.

When I got to Cam Ranh Bay, it was a very large installation and I felt safe there. I was assigned to a sentry dog unit. Our unit was four platoons. I was assigned the job as one of the platoon leaders and as a lieutenant. And our mission was to guard the critical areas where the U. S. military stored its ammunition and fuel and food. You know, those kind of supplies that are critical in wartime. And to protect them from the enemy, from the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, who might either blow them up or steal them.

Every one of my 50 men, was a dog handler who was trained with a German shepherd police dog to be a killer. Who would kill anybody except for the dog handler, including me. My men were in two different groups, one on the coast of Vietnam on the South China Sea at a place called Tuy Hoa. And the other half of them were in the central highlands in a place called Da Lat, which was a very beautiful part of Vietnam in the mountains.

Looked a lot like California, a lot of green plush vegetation and it really wasn't ravaged by war like so much of the rest of Vietnam was. It was sort of the upper class place that people who had wealth went for vacations.

There was a very nice university there, and there was also a military school there. Part of my men were there and there were some U. S. installations there. My job was to supervise these men and make sure they did their job well. That meant flying back and forth by helicopter to these places. And their job was only at night because that's the time that those installations were vulnerable from sneak attack and so forth. They were charged with the responsibility, an individual dog and dog handler, of walking a beat, you might say, on the outside of the parameter of any of those places, outside of the barbwire, outside of the mine fields to prevent somebody from coming in. My job was to make sure that they did their job well. So it included driving around at night with my lights off in my jeep, trying to see if my men were okay and if they were doing their job, if they were awake, those kinds of things. Not a very safe job.

LJ: No.

JS: And it really was a very stressful job, you know. I never saw any combat. I had some friends killed, but I personally never saw any, but I always feared it. I don't know if you're aware of this, but in the Vietnam War, I think it's something like 90% of the people in Vietnam were support troops.

LJ: Oh, I didn't know that.

JS: And only a small number of them were actual combat troops and so there were large numbers of men and women who were doing all the other kinds of things that support a war. And so, I guess you could consider the kind of thing that I did in that category. Of course, the combat troops got all the publicity and that's where all the killing was certainly. You mentioned to talk about special people.

LJ: That come to mind.

JS: Yes, I was only in that position for three months and I really didn't, you know, get to know anybody really well during that period of time. My commanding officer was a captain, who I think was from California. I haven't had any contact with him since those three months. I don't even remember his name.

LJ: Now, I see you were in Vietnam two full years?

JS: No, I was in the military two years; I was in Vietnam one year. The usual length of service in Vietnam was a one-year hitch, they called it. And then, people could volunteer for a second year if they wanted to. And some gung-ho people did, but I wasn't one of those.

LJ: So you did that supervisory job for three months?

JS: Three months and …

LJ: What did you do for the rest of the time?

JS: Well, when I got there I learned that there had only been two people killed out of my company during the previous year and so I thought well that's pretty good. Probably my chances of being killed were, you know, less than 2%, probably close to 1%. And so I thought, it's probably a pretty safe job, but after I learned a little more I realized that both of those people were second lieutenants who were doing the job that I was doing. That cut the odds down from about less than 1% to about 33% death rate. One of my objectives in that crazy war - that I personally don't think we belonged in and, of course, this is a political issue -- was to survive, personally.

LJ: Absolutely.

JS: After three months I noticed there was a flyer that came out from the battalion headquarters. They were looking for a military police officer with a social science background to work in the U. S. prison in Vietnam in Long Binh. This was the largest installation in Vietnam, just outside of Saigon. And there was a prison there called the United States Army Vietnam Stockade, more popularly known by the men in that war as Long Binh Jail, or LBJ, who also happened to be the President at the time. They wanted a lieutenant, a junior-grade officer, to fill a slot in that prison. And it didn't take me very long to figure out that that would be a lot safer assignment than the one I had. So I applied for it and, apparently, they didn't have anybody else, so I got it.

My job for the next nine months was to – I wore several hats. This was a military prison that housed U. S. troops that had violated the law, either the U. S. Code of Military Justice or some law of the country of Vietnam, all kinds of crimes from drug possession, to sales, to rape, murder, multiple murders. We had a number of multiple murderers there. In wartime, a lot of crazy things happen. I had the job of being responsible for the admissions part of the prison. I was the officer in charge of the maximum-security unit of the prison and we had about 200 of the 500 men in there that were in maximum security for violent crimes. And so I was in charge of that.

LJ: And they were all Americans?

JS: They were all Americans, yes. Or Australian or British or some of the other allies that were involved in the war over there but most of them were Americans. Some were civilians, American civilians, who were working in the war effort, but most were military; either Army, Navy, Marines; most of them were Army and Air Force.

The prisoners, when they were there, they would go in there and await their court-martial, their trial. If they were found guilty and sentenced to six months or less, they served it there. And that time that they served in prison didn't count against their time in Vietnam, so they couldn't get out of serving a full year, if they were out in a combat unit by screwing up and spending

their time in prison. They would go right back to the unit where they finished their sentence. If they had a sentence of more than six months, then they were flown back to Leavenworth, Kansas, to the federal penitentiary. We had a number of people who … there wasn't a death sentence, but the maximum sentence was life in prison. We had a number of people while I was there, probably 60 or 70 of them during that nine months, who got life sentences and they were flown back to the states.

Some of the crazy things that I was aware of were crimes that they had committed. We had some Green Beret officers, captains and majors, who were interrogation officers. And their job was to interrogate the enemy once they were captured. They would capture Viet Cong prisoners. Now a Viet Cong prisoner was a person who was South Vietnamese, who was in guerrilla warfare against their own government. Okay? So it was an internal war, it was a civil war.

And when they were captured, they were interrogated through interpreters but some of the tactics used were not always that honorable. And, as mentioned, we had some officers in our prison and there were about four or five of them who were a part of this operation, where they would take a Viet Cong prisoner, they would take two Viet Cong prisoners up in this helicopter out over the South China Sea. And they would interrogate one and if that person didn't cooperate, they'd throw him out. Of course, that was death from the height that they were flying. And the second one would usually talk. Well after they had done this enough and it was a pretty well-known thing that this was going on, somebody finally blew the whistle. They had enough evidence where they convicted all of these people. And they all got very long prison sentences.

We had another incident where a sergeant, E-5 sergeant, was on LSD. And he was tripping and he climbed up on top of the water tower in his company area. The men in this company were in a formation listening to some orders. He had an AK-47 machine gun, Russian machine gun and he opened up on his company and killed multiple people. Those kind of crimes drug-induced, shooting the wrong people, you know, the My Lai kind of incidents if you're familiar with that, that happened in the '60s, where they just mowed down people. And also getting angry at people in their own unit and blowing them away because you know in wartime everybody's got weapons. You get angry, if you can't control your temper, those things happen.

We had a number of people who didn't like their NCO in charge, or their first sergeant of their company and they would throw a grenade in their tent, that kind of thing.

LJ: I wasn't aware of anything like that.

JS: Oh yes, there's a lot of violence and war is hell, you know. And people have weapons and they get angry and they lose their cool and so we had all kinds of those kinds of crimes … raping Vietnamese women. We had a lieutenant in there that was charged with rape of an American nurse. The ironic thing was that his wife was serving over there, too, and they were stationed in the same area. So he had his wife there and his crime was raping another woman during wartime.

LJ: Sad.

JS: Yes, a lot of that went on. So we had about 500 prisoners there at any one time.

LJ: What were the conditions like in that prison?

JS: Pretty sparse. Just before I had gotten there had been a riot in the prison. And they let the population – it was really built for about 300 people - and they let the population get up to over 700. And there was riot. Now, I should say that over 90% of the prisoners in that prison were African-American. And approximately, as I recall - these are just off of my head now - but approximately about 25% of our forces in Vietnam were African-American. A higher percentage than what the U. S. population was at the time, because they were poor; and they ended up in disproportionate numbers in Vietnam and significantly disproportionate numbers in prison.

LJ: So sad.

JS: I have to believe that a lot of that was because of racism, but there are probably other factors as well. They're too complex to go into here. So what happened was that we had a prison that was overcrowded, that was 90% African-Americans, that was basically run by white people. And they finally, at one point in 1968, had had enough, just before I got there. And they rioted and they burned all the buildings down. They killed three white prisoners.

They threw all their mattresses into piles and had big bonfires. They took their bed sheets and wrapped around them and they became African warriors and they jumped around in groups and you know chanted and so forth. And so they sort of returned to their roots and they were in charge, all of the military guards and so forth left the prison. It was all surrounded by chain-link barbed wire fences and double fences and guard towers so they couldn't escape the confines of the prison, but they were in charge within those walls – within those wire walls.

At one point, after this had been going on for several days, the U. S. Army Headquarters that General William Westmoreland was in charge of, which was only about a mile and half away, sent over a colonel in the military police who decided that he was going to put an end to all this. And so, there was a main gate, a double gate that they used to drive vehicles into. And the

company that was in charge of the prison was trying to talk him out of going in and trying to negotiate with them. He was convinced that they would respect his rank, so he ordered them to open the gates. He walked inside and the men, you know, who were milling around and talking, when they saw this happen all of a sudden there was dead silence – 700 men dead silence. All eyes staring at him. They slowly parted and he walked into the middle of them.

Here is this big brave colonel and he was going to settle this. Then, as I'm told by the people, who were still there when I arrived, they slowly closed ranks around him and moved in and beat the hell out him. When they finished with him, they tossed his body near the gate, which was quickly swooped up by the men outside and he was taken to the military hospital and sent to Okinawa to a hospital. And he was unconscious. I never did hear the outcome of his physical condition, but he was just really beaten terribly.

What they did then was they brought in a field commander who had been a part of – they called it the "Big Red One," I can't remember my military terms, I think it stood for the First Brigade or something combat troops. He was a colonel, very tough, old codger and he came in and he ordered Conex containers which were and still are metal containers that are about six by six by six, that they ship goods in on ships overseas. And that's how a lot of the equipment arrived in Vietnam on ships – these big metal containers. He had welders cut – they were solid – a swinging door in front. He had welders cut long thin holes in them so there would be a way to breathe. And they were individual cells.

Somehow or another, he had riot troops push the crowds over to one side and he started stacking these Conex containers in rows and, one by one, he had them sort of single out small groups of men and started herding them into these Conex containers with weapons and bayonets and everything. And they moved them, one by one and put them all in these Conex containers. And when I got there, we had about 200 of those things lined up, one man in each one. And they were only six feet tall and we had a lot of military people over there that were over six feet so they couldn't fully stand up and if they reached from side to side with their arms out, they easily touched both walls, so that's where they spent their time.

They were allowed out once a day to exercise. And it was hot and they were in metal containers. So very quickly after that, they built a roof over them so there was open air around them but roofs over the top just to protect them from the sun. But that's one of the things he did to regain control.

LJ: And then you came right after that?

JS: And I came right after that. right. So that's what I was in charge of, the people in those Conex containers.

LJ: Were they fed then in those containers?

JS: Yes, they got their meals there. There was a dining hall for the medium and minimum-security prisoners, but the maximum-security people spent their whole time there, except for one exercise period a day. And they were taken out in very small groups with lots of guards.

LJ: Wow, what a story.

JS: Yes.

LJ: Anything else come to mind about the prison while you were working there?

JS: Well, there was one of the experiences that I had. I was supply officer for the whole prison and the company that served it, which meant that I actually had the property book and I was in charge of making sure where everything was and the new stuff that came in. I had to make sure it got on the books and had to keep track of where it went and we had to account for it all in inspections. I realized how much corruption there was involved with that war, how many millions of dollars were siphoned off into things that were illegal, how much equipment went away and got sold on the black market, how much of it got shipped back home.

I was actually ordered by a major, who was in charge of me. He ordered me to, you might say, make a jeep – you know, this was a military jeep - disappear from the property books. We just got a new shipment of jeeps in. We had four or five new ones and he wanted me to record one less than there actually was, because he had promised a friend that he'd trade for something else. I don't remember what it was now and they were doing some wheeling and dealing. And I refused to do it. I told him it was illegal. He called me into his office. I was the only white officer in this company because we had mostly African-American prisoners and almost all the company was African-American, including my commanding officer and all the NCOs and I was only white officer.

This African-American man, who stood about four inches taller than me, called me into his office and he asked me that and I told him I wouldn't do it. So he got about two inches from my nose and started screaming at me. He told me he would have me court-martialed for insubordination. And I just stood my ground and told him I simply wouldn't do it and he finally backed off. But that's the kind of thing that went on over there.

We had one lieutenant in prison, who tried to write off one of these huge cranes. You know, they use to building bridges? We had that kind of engineering equipment in Vietnam for all kinds of construction projects. And he was an engineering officer. He was in charge of all of that equipment at Long Binh and he was actually caught red-handed behind the wheel of that crane driving down the street. He was on his way to a place that would

have shipped it to some other Asian country in exchange for $200,000. And he was in prison for that. It wasn't the first time he'd driven off with one of those things. They had apparently discovered that he'd had over a million dollars' worth of property that he'd stolen. So, you know, that's some of what happens in war.

LJ: Very interesting. -- What did you do when you left the military, when you finally got the word that you were out of Vietnam?

JS: Yes.

LJ: No doubt, you were overjoyed.

JS: Oh, absolutely. Yes, it was a countdown – all of us counted down the days from 365 to one. I arrived in San Francisco and processed out at an Army post there.

LJ: The thing you never thought you'd see again?

JS: Yes, that's right … Oakland, actually. And it took about twelve hours from the time I arrived in country to the time that I was walking on the street heading for an airplane to bring me back to North Dakota.

I had actually left from Fargo and I returned to Fargo and then took my first job in Devils Lake after I got back. By the time I actually landed in the United States and got into my first job, it was about five days. Okay? Now I left my company in Vietnam, the people that I served with, we all left one at a time. We didn't go over as a unit and come back as a unit like World War II veterans did. We went one by one and we left at different times. And so I left them and I haven't had any contact with any of those people ever since, because we weren't a cohesive unit and came and went at different times, you know.

I was processed out, flew back to Fargo, had a reunion with my wife and family and literally, just a couple of days later, I was sitting behind a desk as a social worker in Devils Lake, North Dakota, not quite knowing what had hit me. My wife remembers that period of time, for her to talk about it as if I was a caged lion because I was so restless. Yes, I mean I had had this very stressful job in a combat zone for a year and finally I was in this quiet little office, in this little agency, in this little town in North Dakota. And it was quite an adjustment. You know, I had a caseload of children and families that I was working with and this little office of my own. And it all happened in less than a week's time. No debriefing.

LJ: No debriefing?

JS: No celebration, other than my own immediate family.

LJ: No transitional easing?

JS: No and the interesting thing too, was that nobody wanted to talk about it. They were glad I was back. Nobody asked me any questions about what happened during the year. I didn't volunteer anything. They all thought that I didn't want to talk about it. I thought that they weren't interested. So, nobody said anything and, as I had mentioned to you earlier, it was ten full years after that before the first person ever asked me anything about what I did in Vietnam. Ten full years - and it was when the movie "Coming Home" came out – I came home in '69. I think it was out about '79.

LJ: Oh, okay.

JS: And my neighbor at the lake had seen it and mentioned it. I mentioned that I had been in Vietnam and he followed that up with a question, something like, "What did you do over there?" And I stopped dead in my tracks and I said, "You know what? Nobody has ever asked me that before." So it was a period of time that we went through in this country. It wasn't just me and my friends and my family, it was our nation that was somehow or another ashamed and afraid to discuss this subject. And finally, with some of those movies that came out, "Platoon" and "Coming Home" and a few of those. That it became more possible to talk about it.

LJ: Peopled opened up more.

JS: Yes, that's right.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through while serving your country?

JS: Well, I happened to serve during a very unpopular war and a war that I politically disagreed with and I went over with an open mind and thought that I'll take a good look for myself. I know there's a lot of controversy about it. I went over in 1968. And, you know, there were starting to be protests, but I thought I'd judge for myself. And I was there about one week when I came to the conclusion that it was a huge mistake. I'd begin to see all of these problems.

I concluded that it was a civil war that we should have never been involved in, in the first place. We made a great mistake. We spent a lot of money, lost a lot of lives and destroyed a very nice country, because people within that country had a disagreement. They should have settled it, not us. So that would be my thought about the war, about the military. It was a good experience. It gave me a chance to mature. I saw some things and was able to take on some responsibility that I couldn't have done otherwise, so it was really good from that standpoint. But the war was a waste.

LJ: Jim, how would you like to be remembered?

JS: Well -- I've been a university professor for 27 years, so that's been my primary occupation, teaching social work as a professional social worker.

But that hasn't been the center of my life. That's been a job. The center of my life is my family and my children. So I guess, more than anything else, that I was a good person -- that I was a good father, a good husband. That's about it.

LJ: That's all the matters.

JS: Yes.

LJ: Thank you very much for your story.

JS: You're welcome.