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Interview with Vernon Shippee

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Interview
Saturday, 10 February 1990, 0900 hours, by telephone
Vernon Shippee
30 Administration Road
Birchwater, Massachusetts 02324

Yes. You can use my name. Vietnam is all years behind me! I'm on to a new adventure now!

There are about ten of us in a Vietnam vets group here in prison. We've been meeting for about two years. It's helped. There used to be other veterans in the group, but one by one they dropped out until now it's just Viet vets.

My home was Savoy, Massachusetts, up on a mountain. I was about eighteen when I went in the Army. I got my basic training at Fort Belvoir in Virginia, trained as an engineer. From training, I went straight to Travis Air Force Base, got on a plane, made one refueling stop on some little island, and then got off at Tan Son Nhut airbase in Vietnam. I was assigned with the 82nd Engineers at Qui Nhon.

I got into trouble because myself and another guy beat a Vietnamese national to death. We had been drinking and were out in the countryside and picked up this guy we thought was VC because of his accent. We were questioning him, beating on him. We didn't expect him to die. That incident occurred on 16 April 1966. I was court-martialed; forfeiture of all pay and allowances, reduced in rank to E-1 and sentenced to Leavenworth. The court martial lasted the better part of a day.

I was held in the compound in Qui Nhon for awhile. In late April I was sent to Pershing Field. LBJ hadn't even been built yet. Pershing Field later became LBJ. I was there until November 1966. When I arrived it was called Pershing Field and consisted mainly of some GP tents. I ran from a detail once while at Pershing and was gone for a couple of days. I was sitting in a bar when MPs came in and arrested me. I didn't--still don't--think much of MPs. A fellow inmate with me here now was an MP and it sometimes strains our relationship. He wants to tell me happy horseshit about the way it was in Vietnam that I don't want to hear.

A GI tried to escape and the guards shot and blew off a portion of his hand. That wasn't right. Americans shooting at Americans. It started a riot. We burned tents; used whatever wood we could find. The prison population then was less than one hundred; most of us were involved. The guards just let us play ourselves out. LBJ grew out of this incident, for the Army decided to put up a better stockade. LBJ was closer to Saigon than Pershing Field had been.

Most of the early stockade population was white; not many blacks there. By the time I DEROS'd, there were more blacks and hispanics than whites.

I helped build LBJ; it was in the middle of an MP compound. We filled

sand bags, made bunkers. An MP sergeant named Johnson was in charge of the details. We built wooden floors for GP tents. They also had conex boxes. I was in a fucking conex box.

Some of the people there with me whose names I remember were Billy Shepherd, Gregory Hemphill, Jerry Tyler, a big black guy out of Philly we called 'slope' because of his forehead. His name was, uh, Vernon Lawton. Another guy named Tinsley.

We ate about the same food as the guards. Always seemed alright to me. When the new camp first opened, we ate in the MP messhall, so everybody ate the same basic food.

There were 8 to 12 guys in each tent. They were probably GP (L).

What did we have? One cot. No footlocker. No mosquito nets. We were allowed toothpaste, a toothbrush, and one pack of cigarettes at a time. I was eighteen or nineteen years old.

Jeff Klein and Billy Shepherd were close to me. Billy Shepherd and I escaped. We just walked out of the compound. We were on trustee status, so Billy and I walked out, jumped in one of those little three-wheeled buses and rode off.

We went to Saigon and stayed there quite awhile. I was free about a month. I dyed my hair black and wore glasses. I had some General Electric identification, so we did o.k. We were mostly into black market stuff. We'd go into the PX, get liquor and sell it on the streets. With another guy who had plates for counterfeiting the Vietnamese dong, we did o.k. with that. He hid the plates in a chicken coop. We stayed on Tra Hun Dao Street.

I have a tattoo on my left arm: 'born to lose' with flaming dice. One day in Saigon I was standing on the sidewalk in a short-sleeved shirt, and this same Sergeant Johnson drove by in a jeep, saw me, and I was arrested and returned to the stockade.

They stuck me in a conex box for quite awhile--maybe a couple of months. That little motherfucker was hot! There was nothing to do. I passed the time by thinking. I tried to remember what I did as a kid, thought about the formation of the states, oceans, continents, things people taught to me. We weren't let out to go to the latrine. Went to the bathroom in the box. No bath, no shower, didn't even brush my teeth for two months!

Sure there are regulations against such things. But the regs only apply when they're convenient--and they weren't convenient. I had sores all over me, I was nasty! I asked to see the doctor several times and got to see him twice in a period of about two or three weeks. I had gotten a huge lump in my groin, some problem with lymph nodes. I was scared. When they took me out of the box to go to the hospital, the MP said he'd shoot me if I ran. I had a history, you see, of not staying in one

place. When I came out of the hospital they didn't send me back to a tiger cage.

While I was in there, there was another riot in 1966. I don't know what caused it, I was in a fucking box, but they were whipping tear gas into the compound. When the gas started, I took off my shorts, pissed on them and wrapped them around my head so I could breathe.

I got along pretty good with the guards. Some of them won't talk to you about those days? Maybe they won't talk because they are ashamed of what they did. They ought to be ashamed! They acted as though we were the enemy and treated us as if we were. Every opportunity, they abused you--fucking over the food, fucking over work, fucking over sleep. If you found a place to sleep, they fucked over you.

We used to get high when we could. We were able to sneak in marijuana. Outside you could buy joints packed in a regular cigarette package. Or we'd put them in a regular package. There was always a shakedown when we came back from a work detail. You'd have to put your hands over your head while they patted you down and felt in your pockets. And up above our heads we were holding our marijuana in a cigarette package. It was easy. We traded a lot for joints. We'd trade underwear, T-shirts, mosquito nets and other things. Some Vietnamese just gave us things without trading. One Vietnamese gave one guy a pair of wirecutters. He cut the fence and was gone. They picked him up later and he told us about it.

So we'd get high on marijuana and gasoline. We'd soak a sandbag with gas and then sniff it. A black sergeant said the next time he caught anyone doing it, he was going to light them up. He could have done it, too. There was not much booze. No place to make it and no place to hide it for the compound was so small.

Vietnamese used to hang around outside the fence and holler at the GIs, who acted as you might expect--exposing themselves and hollering back.

There was a pecking order in the stockade. My status was high, for I had killed someone. Rapists were not considered low echelon. It was just something that happened. If someone was murdered, it was no big deal. Deserters' status was low. I did some crazy fucking things, but never deserted. But I don't judge those who did. The pecking order stemmed from people's needs to feel better about themselves. The MPs were tough on even combat soldiers.

The worst thing I remember? The fucking conex. I was just trying to survive and trying to escape.