

Tom Wheeler

This oral history is taken from an oral history transcript collected by Paul Nesenchuk of the Inland Northwest Memories Project on May 14, 2005. Born Wallace, Idaho, and raised in Mullan, Idaho, Tom Wheeler graduated from high school in 1968 and went immediately into the Marine Corps.

To access the entire transcript, got to <http://history.tincan.org/search/document.asp?id=116> and click on "Click for Document" under the photograph and introduction. Grammatical mistakes have not been corrected.

I tried to get into all the branches of the service, none of them would take me because I had an underactive thyroid and at that time, they didn't want anyone with anything wrong. I was only 99 pounds but the Marine Corp. finally came out and they told me that they'd take me 'cause everyone was going to war anyway and they figured that everyone was going to get killed so it didn't really matter if I went or not...

I wanted to go to war. That was the main reason I went, and joined the service, and went, just so that I could go to war. I didn't want to stay in the rear. If I wanted to do that, I wouldn't join...To this day I don't know why. It was just that everyone was doing that. Everyone that was joining the war was gone and you were the only one left back in the rear. I just felt that everyone would look down at you, and I wouldn't want that...

My folks knew that I was headstrong and if this is what I wanted to do, that's what I'd do and they'd back me up. And they, my mom and my dad both, are the one's that helped me get into the service...

I landed in Da Nang in 1968. And we were all over the DMC. I was a "grunt" and a tunnel rat, spider man, just about everything there was we went all the way up to Hanoi. We were all over Vietnam.

Well, when I first got there, to me, it reminded me of deer hunting because you did a lot of walking. Sometimes you didn't see anything, sometimes you did. And as time went on, we had fire fights and everything everyday, sometimes two or three times and we'd go out at night, spend the whole night there would be three of us we'd go out there, we were called the listening post. We'd go out and listen to see what the Viet Cong was doing...

I started out as just a grunt. And then I became a radio man and eventually a squad leader. And on my third tour, I was a captain in the Marine Corp. And it was a field promotion because all the other captains and such had been killed that were sent over there...

We had c-rations, is what they were called, they were from WWII that we ate. They were in a can and made in WWII. And they're like in the forties and this were the sixties, so you can imagine. You heard the story green eggs and ham, well the scrambled eggs in the can were actually green because they were so old. You had lima

beans and spaghetti and a cocoa and different things like that and then you had a pack of cigarettes, Camels, Marlboros, EXCT, that I think it had five cigarettes in it. And then later on, they had things called "midrats." And they had those in a package and we could only have those if we were starving to death...

I'd been over there for so long, that I didn't really know if I wanted to come back. I didn't know how they would accept me when I came back, because I heard rumors about other people that had came back from Vietnam. And I didn't know if I'd be better off just staying there but finally we did leave that's why I spent three years over there...

When I went back, I got off the plane, bend down and kissed the ground. And everybody that was there threw rocks at us, bottles at us and called us, "baby killer" and made us really feel bad because we were serving our country. They didn't feel that we should be there and anyone who has been in a fire fight or any situation such as that...

I'm sure some babies got killed. I personally never shot any or killed any that I know of. But I saw a lot of times where they would send a two- or three-year-old toddler out with a grenade or a chi Kong, it's like a grenade does but it's called a chi Kong and they tell the little kid to walk out into the stand of military people and it would blow up and kill the baby and it would kill the military, so if you knew they had one, you would shoot them. It was either them or you. That's why you're over there. You weren't over there ... it's not like being in States.

When I went into war, I didn't even know what I was fighting for. Until this day I still don't. The war didn't accomplish anything. I've been back, like I said this year or it was actually in 2004 in October and November. And it didn't really accomplish a lot. It's fixed so that the Vietnamese could come to the United States. It's made it a little bit better for them over there, as long as they're in the south or north, it's still about the same way it was back then except there's no fighting, but it's still pretty much the same...

I think that people could be spared on what's going on. It's too political for one, and the people in the United States don't need to know everything what's going on. All the details, I don't feel that the news media is supposed to be over there taking pictures and stuff to that effect because it affects the people that are over there bad enough without it affecting their families too. If the families want to know then they could write their kids and ask them how things are going on. Because myself, I didn't tell my family of what was going on until I got back. I told them some, but I didn't want them to worry more than they had already been when I was over there. But to actually watch TV and see your son on TV in a combat situation, I don't feel that's good...

If you're going to sit around and tell people about the war that you know nothing about and you've never been in it, I don't feel you should stand around and burn the flag and protest, because the main thing that I was fighting for was the flag. And now it's a law, you could burn the flag. Well I feel that's an injustice. And the person who made the

law should be shot; I don't care who he is. And if anyone dishonors the American flag or what it stands for, something should be done to take care of them too...

After I came back, I landed in California. And like I said before, there was probably, if I could remember, about twenty or thirty of us that got off the DC-10. We landed, I got out of the plane, there was a lot of commotion, got out, kissed the ground. Everybody else pretty much did the same because that's what we've been talking about the whole time, a lot of the times we were there. And there was just...I don't know but I felt like thousands but there was probably hundreds, I don't know the exact number of people there were but they were throwing bottles at you, spitting on you, throwing rocks at you, calling you "baby killer." And from right then on, I've had, I guess you could say animosity against a lot of the American people. For one, they didn't know anything of what was going on, all they were doing was just going by of what they had heard, not by what they experienced. They didn't believe in war. I didn't believe in war. But I still had the guts enough to go. I didn't have to go, I wanted to go...

I fought for our flag and the people. And I fought for my brother, so he wouldn't have to go to war. And hoping that this will end all wars. But it didn't. We still have to be in places that I feel we shouldn't be. Because all they do is just kill off our families and friends. They don't accomplish anything. Just like the war now, it's just turning into another Vietnam War. The people that run the wars, I won't say who, but they probably never even been in a war...

As far as I was concerned, it was still a war that I feel we shouldn't have been in. But I can't say that it was a useless war or anything to that effect because there were so many people that were killed. Good people. But, and like I said, we shouldn't be in any other war. Because it just makes some people rich and some poor. There should be a way to change things without fighting...

Well, the military is great. We should have more military, even in peacetime. Instead of getting rid of the bases like in Mountain Home, or any of the military bases, those are the things we are supposed to keep strong because we never know when we are going to be hit. Just like with 9-11. You never know when it's going to happen and then we're going to be caught with our pants down. I think we should always have a strong military force in the United States. Just for that and they should bring back the draft...

And no matter how bad you think it is in America, until you go to another country, and see what it is like back there, you'd never be so thankful that you're an American. Because I know I've been to quite a few foreign countries. And I just came back again from Vietnam, in 2004; things have changed a lot, for the good for them, but they're still very poor. But their honest is a day as long, more than I could say about Americans. The Americans are greedy. The Vietnamese people have nothing, but they're still very honorable people. And I enjoyed it when I was there in 2004. I learned a lot. And I plan to go back again some day, hopefully.

Resources:

Web: For many other oral histories and photographs, go to the Inland Northwest Memories Project at <http://history.tincan.org>.

Book: An excellent book on the subject is *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* by Richard H. Minear (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999).

Discussion:

- What kind of emotions can you pick up from Wheeler's words? Do these emotions change throughout the interview?
 - In what ways does Wheeler contradict himself throughout the interview? Why does he do so? Do you think he is aware of it?
 - What does Wheeler leave out? Why do you think he does not talk about certain things?
 - How are oral histories useful to historians? What are the potential problems of using oral histories such as this one?
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Time Travelers: Teaching American History in the Northwest, 2008
Regional Learning Project, University of Montana