

Interview with Mr. Mel Meyer

Veteran – Vietnam War

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Narrator: Today is Wednesday, February 18, 2004. This is the beginning of an interview with Mel Meyer at the Methodist Church in Kinsley. Mel is 59 years old, have been born on June 25, 1944. My name is Jason Wetzel and I'll be the interviewer.

Meyer (answering questions about war, branch of service and rank):

I was in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969 in the U.S. Army. I was a spec-five, E5 at the time I was in Vietnam.

Meyer (answering how he entered the Army):

I was drafted in 1966 and went to Vietnam. Then when I was in Vietnam, I extended, so I could complete a full tour. When I got on ship to go over, I only had 105 days to go in the Army. So when I got over there I extended to complete 12 months in Vietnam. So if I got out I would not have to go to any reserve meetings. But then before my tour was over I reenlisted and stayed in the military.

Meyer (question dealt with the draft):

Before I was drafted I was in Indianapolis, Indiana. I got drafted on the 19th of June, 1966, and I turned 22 on the 25th of June. When you get drafted, you go to the Army.

Meyer (on boot camp/training experiences):

My boot camp was at Fort Knox. It was in June, July and August of '66 – probably the hottest time of the year down there. I remember we did a lot of marching, and they had these three hills at Fort Knox. They called them “heartache”, “agony” and I can't remember the third one. They were large hills we always had to march up to and they would always take you through them at the end of a march. So after you'd been marching for five to ten miles and you were already wore out, a lot of guys could not make it up the hills once we got to those.

Meyer (on emotions):

I wasn't happy about having to go. I had not been married too long at that time. I had failed the physical for the draft and they classified me 1-Y because my back is not fused properly. They told me I wouldn't have to go unless I ran into somebody who thought no matter what I should be able to serve. I ran into a doctor that thought no matter what condition you were in, they would find a job for you—so I

got drafted. So, I was a little bitter at that time, but I had some good sergeants in boot camp—Sergeant White and Sergeant James. They talked to us. Most of the guys in our platoon were draftees. So they said, look you can do it two ways. We know that you don't like it that you're here or you can say, yeah we don't want to be here, but it will only be for two years, so we'll make the best of it and try to learn something. They said that you'll meet some nice guys and some people you can be friends with and the time will go by. So that's what I did. I tried to do my best. I got to enjoy it. It's like anything in life. What you get out of it is what you put into it. Whatever attitude you have going in is going to reflect what you get. So if you go in with a positive attitude saying I am going to do my best and have fun, then more than likely you will.

Meyer (after boot camp):

When we graduated from boot camp, everybody had their orders where they were going to and everybody was comparing where they were going to get their advanced training or MOS. Mine said I had to go to 1783 West Pershing Road in Chicago, Illinois, and it said veterinary school. So I went around asking everybody, what job is this? I asked the sergeants, and they said, "No, that's not your MOS." They told me they had an headquarters up there in Chicago I was going to be a driver for awhile. They needed somebody to drive generals around. I reported to Chicago when I was suppose to, and low and behold I wasn't going to be a driver. This is where they had the veterinary service school. I was trained to be a food inspector as it was part of the veterinary service. All of the officers we had were veterinary doctors. That's what it turned out to be. I don't know how I got that job; I was just in the right place at the right time, and they needed somebody so I was selected for it. I felt I had just lucked out. If I had not been in that field I may not have stayed in, but I really enjoyed that field the whole time I was in. That made a big bearing on what I did in the military.

Meyer (on job as food inspector):

There were a lot of things that came under that. As a food inspector, we were in charge of different aspects of it, but if you were on a post, all of the food that came into the post had to go by a veterinary inspector to inspect it. We had to check the food to make sure it had the proper dates, proper freshness, proper condition and grade that the contract was let for. The military has a large system of buying things. Most of the headquarters of that is in Philadelphia at a place called Defense Personnel Support Center. They write specifications for everything. If they want to buy bottled water, there is specification written on how this bottled water should be put up, how it should be packaged, and how it should be containerized. We had to know those regulations for it. Anything you can think of that you eat, we had to inspect it to make sure it met what the government was buying. We also sometimes worked in a plant. I worked in meat plants where they were putting up bacon, hot dogs, bologna, corned beef, canned ham, carcass beef, and pork products. We had to watch while these were being made to make sure they were made up to specifications and sanitations that was required by the military or by the government. Some of those places had USDA people in there working who do that for everybody, but we had requirements that were more stringent than what the USDA required.

When I was overseas, I worked in plants that had no USDA. We had to do the same thing that the USDA does overseas. Like just what they do here in the states. We would work the kill floor. We would look at the cattle in the holding pens when they would bring them in. We would decide if something was sick and get rid of it. Then we would say these we will take. Then we would go into the slaughterhouse and watch them being slaughtered. We would check the guts and everything to make sure there were no internal diseases or anything that would contaminate and if they did find it would get rid of it. Then we would take and grade the beef just like the USDA grades meat that you eat. If it didn't meet grade, we wouldn't buy it. If it met grade, then we would procure it for food for the military. The food that I bought was not only for the Army, it was for the Navy, the Air Force and the Department of Transportation. The Coast Guard, although it is counted as a military unit it is really under the Department of Transportation. We bought food for all of those places. We also bought food for the veterans' hospitals.

When I was in Virginia, I had a place I used to go up in the mountains to inspect. It was a trout farm. The reason we used to inspect this trout farm and the trout that they grew was that they were buying trout for the President for the White House for big formal dinners. We had to go up there and inspect it and make sure it was healthy and it wasn't being contaminated. It's a long list of what we had to do...not only for meat, but I also to grade eggs and grade vegetables. I worked in the coffee factories where they were putting up coffee for the military. All kinds of things, so it was ever changing. Everyday was different. When I was stationed in New Orleans, I worked the shrimp boats down in the bayous of Louisiana. I would have to go there at two o'clock in the morning to be on the docks when the shrimp boats would come in when they would start unloading the shrimp to inspect the shrimp that the government was going to buy. It was varied; it wasn't the same thing everyday. That made it exciting and interesting.

Meyer (on overseas factories):

When we were in Vietnam, we were buying local fruit and vegetables from local vendors. They had vendors in Vietnam who grew fruits and vegetables. They would sell them to the government. They use to come into the bases and we would have to inspect their fruits and vegetables and approve them. The reason they did this was it was diplomatic and it was good to help the economy over there. But also, it gave fresher food to the troops because if you just ship everything over, it takes 30 days for food to come over on a ship. It probably was put up 30 days before that. Some of it is quite old when it gets there. If you get it locally, you can buy stuff that is fresher.

When I left Vietnam, I went to the Netherlands. When I was stationed there, we used to go to Belgium once a week. We would go to an egg factory and buy eggs for the military and they would ship them all over Europe. We had people in the Netherlands in one of the other units. One of the units up at the Hague at the embassy was buying butter and milk products and shipping them all over.

Then I got sent for 90 days to Yugoslavia. We were buying meat products from Yugoslavia. I was putting up canned hams. I was buying whole carcasses of beef, pork loins, pork butts and pork spareribs, all kinds of pork products. When I was in Yugoslavia it was a Communist country. Everybody was asking what are you doing in a Communist country? If you remember back in World

War II, Yugoslavia was an Allied Countries. They fought on the same side as the United States. They owed the United States a war debt from World War II. The premier of Yugoslavia was Tito, and he was trying to pay off this debt that they owed the United States. They paid the United States in dinar, their currency. The only place that dinars were good was Yugoslavia. You couldn't spend them anywhere else. Basically, we had this room in Washington, D.C. with all these dinars that we couldn't do anything with. We couldn't spend them any place. We were taking dinars and spending them in Yugoslavia to buy beef, pork products and eggs also. They would pay so much for the product, and then 25 percent of the product would be taken off what they owed. We were spending these dinars to get rid of them so we could use them. And the 25% was taken off from what they owed us. It was a good deal for both of us and most of the stuff was procured locally.

They put up one of the best canned hams in the world. I used to laugh at it. When they make a canned ham it can have up to ten percent added juices and stuff. If they went over five percent they would get mad. They didn't want it to be over five percent added fat and juices. We use to laugh because in the United States when we put up canned hams in a factory, the quality assurance people in the factory, if they couldn't hit 9.99 percent fat every time they would have fired them and got somebody else. They wanted to get away with as much as they can. Here in Yugoslavia they wanted as little as possible. That was kind of unique in the thinking of the people.

Meyer (about interacting with foreigners):

It was a lot different. You have got to remember that no matter where you live at or no matter where you go in the world that they have been raised different than you have. What you take for granted, to them may be a luxury. They do not have a lot of things that we even take for granted. You can go over there and flaunt your wealth, but you will not be accepted. If you try to meet them on their level and try to understand how they do things...try their food, go into their houses. Try to understand how they do things. You will be accepted more and you'll make a good friend and they will do anything for you.

I had a Dutch landlord when I lived in the Netherlands. His wife and he had nine kids. They adopted me like I was their tenth kid. They had an old typical Dutch house that was in the front. And in the old Dutch-German homes the stables were connected to the back of the houses; they had a long hall way that would lead back to the stables. Well, they had taken this house that had been out in the country like an...and had converted the stables into apartments. So I had one of these apartments. It was very rustic. At that time they did not have central heat like we do here in the United States...didn't have air conditioning. So all you had was just a little oil stove down in one room to keep that area warm. The rest of the room, rest of the house didn't have any heat. They didn't have water heaters like we have. They have water heaters that heat on demand; it runs on propane. But it was entirely different from what I was used to here. But I got used to it. And that's how I lived.

My landlord was just terrific to me. She used to send her three daughters in. She would say, "Oh no, the man shouldn't clean the house," so she would send her daughters in to clean the house for me, but I paid them because...that wasn't right for them to come in and take care of me, for no reason. And so I used to pay her daughters to clean my house. It would give them a little money and was still

cheap. I paid her one son to wash my car all the time. He would always want some money. He was in about the, Martin was in the eighth or ninth grade. So he was always...same as here in the States, kids want some money. These people were not rich; they lived on much less than what we do. You have got to remember in the...a lot of foreign countries like in the Netherlands at this time (this is back in the early '70s) 50 percent of what they make goes to taxes...they have government insurance that takes care of all their health and everything. That's still a lot of money to give away. So they don't have quite what we do. Their standard of living is a lot less than ours. So their kids were always looking for a little money. I made extra so I was okay. I used to pay him to wash my car, and we got along really good. I was staying there when I went to Yugoslavia. I had to get up at like two o'clock, one or two o'clock in the morning to go to the airport to fly down there and Mom's like, I can remember that, Mom's standing out there in her night gown and a robe. She had packed me this little lunch, and she's out there crying because I'm going to be leaving for 90 days. Just like one of her kids, she said, "Here, here so you don't get hungry on the plane." She said, "In case they don't feed you, you'll have something to eat." These people didn't have to do that, but they were good people. They were used to doing things like that.

Mom told me about World War II. The area that they lived in during World War II is an area that General Patton came through and liberated from the Germans and back then during the World War II...a lot of these places they didn't have camps for the G.I.s to stay in. They used to stay in homes with people. They had three G.I.s that stayed with her and her sisters and her mother and dad in her home. She told me about when they went out on the maneuvers one time and when they came back, one of the guys did not come back. They lost him and they didn't know what happened to him. Her, her sister, and her girlfriend went through German lines over into Germany because where I lived it was just a couple miles over into Germany. They went over there and they found this guy and he was wounded. And they drug him back home and saved his life. This is how these people were. They were very pro American because the Americans had liberated them from the Germans during World War II. So they really liked the Americans. So that was what made that area nice where I was at.

The area of the Netherlands, where I am talking about was on the bottom . The Netherlands is a teardrop, and I was right in the center of the teardrop. There's...you know what NATO is? North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Well, under NATO there is a supreme headquarters, which is called SHAPE. This was in Brussels, Belgium. That's where SHAPE Headquarters was stationed. Well, under SHAPE there's three subordinate headquarters. There's AFNORTH, which is in Oslo, Norway; there's AFSOUTH which is in Vincia, Italy, and then there is AFCENT. Armed Forces Center Europe. At one time, it was in Fontainebleau, France. De Gaulle kicked all the military out of France. So they moved it to the Netherlands. And I was at a NATO headquarters. When I left Vietnam, we had Army, Air Force, and the Navy stationed there. From Canada, from England, from France, from Belgium, from the Netherlands, and from Germany, so it was a small, small little area. We only had 500 Americans there. Only 250 of them were Army, 250 in the Air Force, and 11 in the Navy. There was only like 2,000 troops there total, but we were from six nationalities. So I was initiated into the different cultures of there different countries, very quickly. Because as a NATO headquarters, we not only celebrated our holidays that are special to us, but we also celebrated all these other nationalities' holidays that are

special to them. So we all celebrated with one another. It made you incorporate all these cultures into your life very quickly...which was very unique. And there's some things that were very exciting.

Meyer (answering questions about holiday experiences):

(Laugh) The biggest holiday in the Netherlands is what they called "Vastenavond" or "Carnival." Now "Vastenavond" or "Carnival" correlates, or goes right along with what Mardi Gras is in New Orleans. Now, I know everybody here knows about Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Well, "Fascia" or "Carnival" is the same over in Europe. It takes place at the same time period before Ash Wednesday. Because it's a time of riotous living to get rid of all these things out of your life before you start being sober and very pious during Ash Wednesday. That was, I had never seen anything like that when I was in the Netherlands. I guess I had lived a sheltered life because I just couldn't understand some of these things. During Fascia, nobody was married. Everybody took off their wedding bands. The wife went this way and her husband went that way and they went out and partied for ten days. And then they would all go home and everything would be hunky-dory. (Laugh) And to me I said, "That's strange" but I wasn't raised that way, so that is different to us. But to them that was normal. If a wife or husband seen someone they wanted to cheat with during their marriage, they would wait and do it during Fascia and it was okay. It was legal. There would be nothing done about it. The wife was happy with it because if she saw some guy she wanted to have an affair with, she would have it during Fascia. It was over with; that was it. They would go back to normal. I still have a hard time understanding that (laugh) but this was their lifestyle. When you are in Rome, you do as the Romans do. It was an interesting time for me as a young person to understand that. That's the way it was. The Dutch people were very nice people. The Germans have what they call Oktoberfest. Oktoberfest is sort of like Mardi Gras. They do a lot of drinking and get drunk. They all get together and dance the old German polkas, and sway back and forth.

Meyer (answering question about keeping in touch with family):

Wrote lots of letters. When I was in Vietnam, we could write all the letters that we wanted to and we didn't have to pay postage for anything, any mail that went out. So I sent a lot of letters to family and friends all the time. I remember my mother had this recipe of a cross between a brownie and a cake that I liked. She used to take two-pound coffee cans. You don't see them anymore. You see the little one pound can and the big 3 pound can, but they use to have these two pound cans. They were about 4" in diameter and stood about 7 or 8 inches high. She used to make this brownie and then she would take this coffee can and cut out circles of the brownie. Then she would take the can and stack them up in layers with wax paper between each layer. Then she would wrap them up and send them to me when I was in Vietnam. The brownie would only last as long as you would get it unwrapped because if you didn't unwrap it right away, and if you didn't take the first part, you would never get any. You shared it with everybody you were with, and everybody did that. No matter what, it was something from home, and you shared it with them. The church that my sister went to, their youth group, the kids made boxes for Christmas and I got a little box of candy and a few little things like that. Those were very touching to get when you think about people doing things like that. When I was over seas at the

other places, you had to pay your postage, but you still wrote letters and that is how you stayed in touch. Every so many years I would take vacation and come home. Most the time when I lived in Europe, I lived there for three years, I didn't come back. But when I was in the States, every couple of years I would take vacation and go home and visit my family.

One thing you have to remember, when I came back from Vietnam, the people of the United States were not pro-military as they are today. When you came back from Vietnam, you didn't tell anyone that you just came back from Vietnam...not unless you wanted spit on, not unless you wanted to be called a baby killer because that is what they did. You didn't tell them, "Yeah, I just came back from Vietnam." That was a no-no. The people during Vietnam were very much against the war. Now, everybody is very pro-military. They are doing all kinds of things for the troops that are in Iraq and in Bosnia. I'm glad to see it. It is what they deserve. You don't really know what you go through unless you have been there. It's easy once you have come home and you get used to all the nice things around you, it's easy for you to forget those times. They're [wars] not good; no war is good. There's no easy way to say, "Oh yeah, world war is okay". It's not; it's not. That's hard. It's hard to explain unless you have been there. I can talk to people who have been there [Vietnam] or have been in the military for 20 years and when I meet them, right away we have a bond because we have done something together. We have the same brotherhood. When one says something, the other understands. They don't have to explain it. It's only something you can feel if you have been through it. The other night, you were a queen candidate, and you know how that made you feel. The only people who can understand that are the other three that were out there with you. Somebody who was not out there could not understand that. Jason was a king candidate. People cannot understand his emotion unless they were standing out there. It is the same thing if you are in war. You have to be there to understand it.

Meyer (answering questions about friendships):

Oh yes, I have several people that I keep in contact with. We e-mail back and forth all the time—some from Nam, some from when I was in the Netherlands, some from the States. There are some that I wish I could find, but I haven't been able to. I keep looking. If I find them, I'll get in contact with them. Yes, I keep in contact with several people. I stayed in the service for 20 years. A lot of the people I was in service with, I stayed in the service with them. Most of the sergeants that I went to Vietnam with, what you call "lifers" stayed in the service for a long time, too. So, I used to run into them all the time. The field I was in in the service only had 1200 people in the whole army worldwide and 300 of those were officers. That's not many people. In my branch of field, you served with people all the time that you had been someplace else with. If not, you served with someone who had been with them. It was like a close-knit family because there were so few of us. It was easy to stay in contact with those people.

Meyer (answering questions about service ending):

My service ended on August 1, 1986. I was in Fort Dix, New Jersey. That's when I retired. I have 20 years of military service. It was kind of surreal. After having a style of living for 20 years, and then for that to stop, it's a big change. For 20 years of my life, for 20 years, 1 month and 11 days, I got

up every day of my life and I put on a uniform of my country. I represented my country. Then it just stopped. It was an entirely different change. Then I had to decide what to wear everyday. Before I had no decision. I had a uniform and you just put your uniform on. It was a big change. A lot of times I still miss the military. I miss the comrardery that we had with everybody. I miss the travel. There's a lot of things that I miss. It took me a long time to adjust from being in the military.

Meyer (answering questions on benefits):

I don't have a college education, but I have an education that you cannot get out of books. I have lived all over the United States and all over the world and I visited a lot of countries. When I see a movie of someplace I have been, that movie comes to life. Because I not only see that movie, but my mind also triggers the sounds and the smells that I knew when I was at that spot. That's a benefit. There are things you learn that you can't get out of books. As far as other benefits, I retired with 20 years of military service. I draw a retirement for the rest of my life from the military. They pay for 80 percent of all my medical. I can use any military facility any place in the world. I can go to it and use it. I can go shopping at the commissary at the PX, go see the doctor there, go use their special services and get discount tickets to shows and things all over. The military has places [resorts] that you can go to and stay that are owned by the military. You can stay there at a discount. They have a hotel on Waikiki Beach, and it is for the military. I can stay there real cheap. Things like that, that's a lot of the benefits.

Meyer (answering question on regrets):

No, not really. There were things that happened in the military that I could not control that upset me, things I didn't like. There was sometimes that I came out on the short end of the stick. That happens at anything you do. That happens in anything in life. You're not promised a perfect life. You're not promised everything going your way. A lot of times you wished they would, but they don't. So no, I don't have any regrets. If there is anything, I wished I had stayed in longer.

Meyer (answering question on people considering military):

Each individual is different. It takes a certain temperament to live in the military and to get by in the military. So the military is not for everybody. But at the same time, it can be a good life. The pay right now is much better now than what it was when I went in. When I went in 1966, my pay was \$78 a month. Out of that, they took \$40 and put \$55 with it and sent it to my wife. So I had to live on the rest of it. I had worked at a job when I was drafted that I was making \$900 a month. This was back in '66 and that was a lot of money. I had bills for \$900 a month; then all of a sudden I am getting \$78 a month before they take taxes and everything out of it. I couldn't pay the bills. It took a long time to get all those bills paid off. There were provisions for that. That was hard. Now today, they make a whole lot more than what I did when I went in. So there is a lot more benefits that they can have.

If some really wanted to go into the military, I would be glad to talk to them and tell them what I know about the military. It depends on what field you want to get into. There are all kinds of fields you can get into. I wouldn't say going into the infantry would be the best deal in the world, but some people like the infantry. If I would have been in the infantry, I would not have stayed in. The chances of

survival are a lot less than the other fields. But, not everybody is in the infantry. Not everybody is in armor or artillery. For every infantry soldier you have out there, in the background you have 6 soldiers that are needed to support that one in the field. There are a lot of jobs that you can choose from. But it is a good life especially if you don't mind travel, and you can figure that you will be three years at a place at the most. If you are there longer than that, you are lucky. Sometimes it's only one year. Sometimes you go places that you can't take your family so you are going to be separated from your family. That's a bummer, that's bad. That's always bad. But that is part of it. You have to have a partner that is able to support you 100 percent in the military. If not, it's going to be rough. I know; I have been down that road. That's the downside of my military career. When I was married, they did not support me in the military. They fought against it. That causes a lot of problems. At the same time, if they don't fight it, if they are an adventurous individual and they don't mind traveling and seeing new things and doing new things. When I went down to Yugoslavia and I was living there, I was living by myself. At that time I was on a passport because they were not suppose to know that I was in the army because that was behind the Iron Curtain. But I lived by myself in these towns. And I did not speak Croatia or Serbian. I knew a little German and I knew a little Dutch. I learned some of their language, but I didn't know it. But I had to communicate with these people. And there were no other Americans around to talk to. I was out there on an island by myself, and that's sometimes what you are going to get to. Even if you're married, I had friends of mine in the Netherlands. They were up in Denmark and they were stationed in a place with their family and with their wife and kids and they didn't speak Danish, but they had to learn it because everybody else didn't speak much English. Those are the bad parts. But if you've got an adventurous spirit and your attitude it right, you can turn that into a plus.