

A Veterans Oral History
Heritage Education Commission
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Larry Nicholson
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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LJ: Larry, where were you born?

LN: **St. Paul, Minnesota.**

LJ: And who were your parents?

LN: **Alvin Nicholson and Clara Dean.**

LJ: And what did they do?

LN: **My dad worked at the American Hoist and Derrick in St. Paul welding and that type of thing, I suppose. He died when I was 11. We really never did know.**

LJ: I'm sorry. How about your mother, did she . . . ?

LN: **She worked at the Pearson's Candy factory, then a housewife, you know.**

LJ: Did you get a lot of candy?

LN: **I don't remember.**

LJ: Where did you go to school?

LN: **Oh, several schools, I was young but graduated from Detroit Lakes.**

LJ: What did you do after high school?

LN: **About week or so after graduation, I was in the Air Force.**

LJ: Did you freely enlist or were you drafted?

LN: **I did freely enlist, yes.**

LJ: And what branch?

LN: **Air Force.**

LJ: Where did you go for military training?

LN: **Lackland Air Force Base for basic. And then they had on-the-job training type thing at a place called Hanna City near Peoria, Illinois. I was there for like two, two-and-half years, maybe.**

LJ: What did you do after that time?

LN: **From there I went to Vietnam.**

LJ: What was that like once you stepped off the plane?

LN: **I tell you, it was the weirdest feeling. I can remember leaving Travis Air Force Base and not knowing if you're coming back, the strangest feeling in the world. The first night in Vietnam I can remember being in the transient barracks and seeing the planes being shelled on the runway. It's kind of a sickening feeling. You don't know what to think.**

LJ: How old were you?

LN: **I just turned 19.**

LJ: Oh, that's so young. Any special memories that come to mind those first weeks in Vietnam?

LN: **Oh, yes, when I first got there, Saigon, they shipped you off to – I was at Binh Thuy, which is a Vietnamese Air Force Base. We did not live in the barracks right away because we had to stay in an old French hotel, because they were building our barracks. And it was kind of different. You know, trying to get used to things and seeing how the lifestyles were. Man, it was just like a culture shock, because what you and I are used to is like, you know ... you take showers every day and you have regular restroom facilities. Over there it was just not that way. It's a whole new world, you know.**

LJ: Did you meet up with some special friends?

LN: Oh, yes, we had some friends out there. As a matter of fact, there was one guy that worked – his wife worked here. I don't know if you knew Mary Stack or not. She's used to be a switchboard operator here on our campus [unclear] where Eileen works.

I had met him in Vietnam. I was a communication specialist. His job was to repair our equipment. Never knew him before that, but met him over in Vietnam and I found out he lived in Wolverton. And then, of course, became fast friends. I got out before he did. Then I didn't see him for a year or so, and I bump into him occasionally. It was kind of unique and strange in a way, you know.

LJ: How many in your squadron?

LN: We were attached in Vietnam to a, you might say, Vietnamese Air Force Base. I would venture to say there were probably, maybe two to three hundred Americans on the base,. There were a handful who did what we did. They had the military police and the cooks. That's about it. There was a little place called Can Tho, right down the road, which was an Army base, so they shared [unclear]

LJ: So what was the food like? Was that a culture shock, as well as everything else?

LN: If you went into their eating establishments you didn't know what you're eating. Because you didn't know the language and you didn't know what it was considered. I heard that dogs were a delicacy. I don't know if it was true or not but I don't think I ever ate a dog but . . .

LJ: Hope not?

LN: Hope not, yes. Most of the food I ate was on the base.

LJ: How was the base food?

LN: It was pretty good, you know, typical . . . yes, Army/Air Force type food.

LJ: How long were you in Vietnam?

LN: One year.

LJ: Where were you working, I mean, where was your location?

LN: We had a communications – it was more like a bunker-type thing than anything else, with all the sandbags and all this stuff [unclear]. What I did ... I worked at the switchboard and I worked a teletype and I decoded messages as a crypto-operator and things like that. Right in the middle of the base ... no windows, that type of thing. We all had to be able to do something in the dark because it is amazing how fast you had to adapt to things but you did it.

LJ: Any special memories come to mind?

LN: Well, I lost a few friends, you know. You often wonder what happened to some of these people because you get there; and as you're there for a while, some people already put their year in and they're leaving soon. And so you don't keep contact with any of them. They just come and go. The country is beautiful. There's no doubt about the country, but the stuff people went through, you often wondered why. A lot of people still wonder why. I don't know, you know.

LJ: What year were you in Vietnam?

LN: October of '67 through October of '68. I was there right when the Tet Offensive started.

LJ: The what?

LN: The Tet Offensive when the VC started the big push .to take Americans out. That was like in January of '68.

LJ: So you were kind of midway through?

LN: Yes, I was there when all hell broke loose. That was a big offensive that started ... our base almost got overrun by the Viet Cong and the military means that were over there.

LJ: Any stories that you'd like to share?

LN: I got to think of a few. I should have thought of something before and after you leave I'll probably think of something. I remember seeing a plane get shot down right over the river. And it's kind of strange to see that and you'd see the fighter fights all the time and we'd have to work on. Every so many days you had to be like auxiliary police, if you want to call it that.

- The French had left their bunkers – big round, sand bunkers. Every so many days you had to go on the line with the military police or the Army and fill in, so it was kind of . . .**
- LJ:** What was that like?
- LN:** **Scary ... I can remember being shelled and every night you got shelled.**
- LJ:** Really?
- LN:** **Yes and when you go out to the bunker and they give you the opportunity for you to come back out. What used to happen is that you'd be shelled for a while and you would get people to go back out. They would get shelled again and catch all the GIs back outside, so, but they'd give you the all clear after that and so.**
- LJ:** Were you ever hit?
- LN:** **Oh, no, I was lucky. Some weren't so lucky. A friend of mine from Blackduck – his last month in Vietnam he lived in the bunker, I mean outside. He didn't live in the barracks; literally lived in the bunker. You know, so it was kind of . . .**
- LJ:** Was he hit?
- LN:** **No, he just wanted to be sure he got home. But a lot of things they'd say, and a lot of things you can't keep. I brought back souvenirs and stuff like that. I got shrapnel. I was taking pictures one day ... well, I didn't know what I was taking pictures of, but it was an airplane going by and they took my film away. I remember that. That's kind of strange.**
- LJ:** Taking pictures of what?
- LN:** **Of an airplane flying over and they took my film away.**
- LJ:** Who took it away?
- LN:** **MPs, they didn't tell you why. I just took pictures of something I wasn't supposed to. So it was kind of . . .**
- LJ:** And the MPs are the Military Police?
- LN:** **Yes.**

LJ: Did you have any problem with sickness?

LN: **No, I was pretty fortunate there, but some guys did. It was really funny, you make really good friends there. You find a way to entertain yourself day after day. Lot of guys played poker. A lot of letter writing, and a lot of, you know, junk like that.**

LJ: Get packages from home, no doubt?

LN: **Off and on ... yes, if they weren't crushed in the mail or something. You know, cookies and stuff like that, they'd send over. You couldn't send money home. You were only allowed [unclear] I take that back. You could only send so much money. They didn't want people sending you money because they'd take the U. S. currency, if you cashed it in. So that's they have military payment notes, you know. So every so often they'd change the military payment – "script" they called it.**

LJ: You said you were in from October of . . .

LN: **October of '67 to October of '68.**

LJ: So you spent Christmas there?

LN: **Oh, yes.**

LJ: What was that like?

LN: **Well you get lonely, but also a lot of people there. You just made the best of it, you know.**

LJ: Were there USO shows?

LN: **Yes, there was one. I can remember Martha Raye coming.**

LJ: She's fun.

LN: **She did "Hello Dolly" I think it was. But that I remember, that was fun to watch. But other shows were further away. You couldn't get to them.**

LJ: They were what?

LN: **There were other shows but, you know. It depends where you're stationed. Yes, you'd like to see another one but . . .**

LJ: When did you find out that your tour was over and you were free to go home?

LN: **They told you up front you were there for a year.**

LJ: So you knew that in October?

LN: **Oh, yes and they try to get you to re-up. Uh, no, no, no, I'm not going back.**

LJ: They wanted you to sign up for another tour?

LN: **Oh, they always want you to sign up. They'll give you bonuses and 30 days off but no, no, no.**

LJ: I'll get out of here with my life.

LN: **Get out now, yes.**

LJ: And what was it like going home?

LN: **Boy, I'll tell you, being ecstatic. I can remember on the way back landing in Hawaii. And GIs were getting off – most of us had a camera. The GIs were getting and kissing the ground. You wouldn't believe how emotional, just watching those people.**

LJ: Did you have a layover in Hawaii?

LN: **It was probably three or four hours, maybe. Then back to stateside.**

LJ: What was it like to see your your mother?

LN: **It was a relief. It was kind of nice to see your family and everybody's okay and adjust back to . . .**

LJ: Was it a big celebration?

LN: **Yes, we had a party. It was kind of nice to get back and see your family and get back to business, you know.**

LJ: How were you treated once you got home by other people other than your family?

LN: **Pretty well, I didn't have any problems with that. Some people may have but really, nobody really said a whole lot. But I can remember bigger cities, I think, you heard a lot more than smaller towns.**

LJ: Terrible the way they were treated coming back.

LN: I can remember a few men on campus when I was going to school here. And the protests they had here on campus and stuff and like. I thought even though they were against the war, people [unclear] were respectful to the GIs. I think they were, you know.

LJ: As they should be.

LN: Because the GIs were just doing ... if you're drafted, what do you do?

LJ: Did you have a tough time adjusting once you got home?

LN: No, tried to put that behind me and just move on, you know.

LJ: No flashbacks or . . . ?

LN: Oh, you think about stuff every now and then, but you know. You have to deal with it.

LJ: But for the most part you had a good adjustment.

LN: Yes, I think so.

LJ: And what did you do once you got home?

LN: I just laid around for a while but started going to school at Moorhead State. I've been here ever since.

LJ: Larry, do you have any final thoughts about what you went through serving your country?

LN: I'm proud to serve my country. I don't regret that. But another thing, you kind of wonder sometimes if the things you are involved in are just, you know. I think that's how the Americans are viewed as having a black eye sometimes. You just do whatever the government wants you to do, right or wrong. You never know, two years later, if it was right or wrong. How do you know at the time?

LJ: What do you think about the war we're fighting now in Afghanistan?

LN: I think Bush is doing a good job. I really do. I mean, I'm not a Republican by any means; but no, I think he's doing the right thing. He has to it's our way of life, it's our freedoms that's being violated.

I mean, I don't know if we're violating their freedoms. I have no clue, but to kill as many people as they did. But they still, whoever did it must have felt pretty strongly to do what they did. There has to be reason for it. I don't know if anybody's asked them why they did it. And we're quick to have someone do that. Like Pearl Harbor, why would you go into Pearl Harbor and do what they did? Or why would you kill all the Jewish people, for what reasons?

LJ: How people can be so evil?

LN: I know. It's just, it's just un, you know.

LJ: Do you think we can win, possibly win the war on terrorism?

LN: I think so, but you've got to get together the countries to cooperate, that's a good thing ... if it's not us. There used to be a saying. I don't remember how it goes but something to the effect that, "If we don't stop them now, who's going to do it?" Somebody's got to step up to the plate and stop it. If you look around the world you can see the bombings in London sometimes, or bombings in Ireland, always in Israel, it seems like. Then in South America you hear about them, too. But nobody's stepping up to stop it. I mean, it just goes on and on and on.

LJ: We just put up with it.

LN: Yes, nobody should have to go through that.

LJ: No, very scary way to live.

LN: I know. I don't know how people, just don't know how they do that.

LJ: Did you ever think that terrorism would hit U. S. soil? Did you ever think?

LN: No, I never thought that, not on our soil. But then again, the Atlanta bombings and the Olympics, that was a form of terrorism for whatever reason. You're never sure [unclear] what kooks are going to do ... abortion clinics and stuff like that, you know. They have to be crazy to do stuff like that.

LJ: But never such a . . .

LN: **Not to that magnitude, yes.**

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

LN: **Oh, as somebody who served his country and lived what they, he thought was right, right or wrong, but believing in, you know, the ideals of the American people [unclear].**

LJ: Thank you, Larry.

LN: **Okay, bye, bye.**