

Shannon Zeltmann

Oral History of Wayne Van Nostrand

Conducted: November 9, 2018

Due: November 30, 2018

Shannon Zeltmann: I am Shannon Zeltmann. It is November 9, 2018 and I am in one of the classrooms [Room 304] in Weidensall Hall at Gettysburg College with Wayne Van Nostrand to talk about his experience during the Vietnam War era.

Zeltmann: So, to start off, let's start with the beginning of your life. Where did you grow up?

Wayne Van Nostrand: I was born in 1945 in Bloomfield, New Jersey; that's in Sussex County New Jersey, about fifteen minutes west of Manhattan.

Zeltmann: What was your childhood like?

Van Nostrand: At the risk of sounding over the top, I'm going to call it ideal. I grew up in a traditional family. Back then we were middle class; back then the fathers worked, and the mothers didn't. We lived in a compact neighborhood. There was extended family there all the time. It was a very loving environment. My dad—I would call him a typical provider. He was stern, firm, but also loving and caring; worked overtime when our family needed it. My mom essentially raised me, but, like I said, there were always people around, whether they were friends or family. Dinnertime half the time there seemed like there were people there outside our family there. I was the first kid born and I was the first kid for a while. My sister came seven years later, my second sister ten years later. And it was a joyful time...

Zeltmann: What were your parents' names and siblings' as well?

Van Nostrand: My dad's name was Walter, my mom's name was Kay, and my sisters' names were Lynn and Gale.

Zeltmann: And what did your dad do?

Van Nostrand: Well, he worked, and I guess this was lucky for me, I was born right at the end of World War II.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And my dad did not serve because he worked for Westinghouse building aircraft engines. He was not called to serve. And had he not been there, I probably would not have been born. So, it was a good deal.

Zeltmann: Yeah. So, what was your neighborhood like growing up?

Van Nostrand: It was a really safe place and a really social place. I would say I knew the names of, and say hello and knew the names of, fifty different families, which is rare these days.

Zeltmann: Yes.

Van Nostrand: And we played in the streets and there was no fear of any problems as being kids, even little kids because the moms were always there and if anyone had a problem or if anyone lost a tooth or anything like that, someone's mom would pick them up, bring them home, and take care of them. Playing was essentially, got home, did my homework, and playing until dark, depending obviously on the season. And it was old school democratic playing, you know, people picked sides, and if you weren't picked you didn't play.

Zeltmann: What were some of the games you played?

Van Nostrand: We played baseball, football, basketball—I mean, those were the main sports, and still are. In high school I played soccer and tennis, but growing up, I played mostly those three games.

Zeltmann: OK. Did you play soccer and tennis for a team in high school, for your high school?

Van Nostrand: Yeah, for my high school.

Zeltmann: OK. Did you go to church?

Van Nostrand: Yes. We went to a Presbyterian church and did some things through the church. I played in a church basketball league, which was really pretty interesting because it expanded my horizons. We played some other churches, in my general vicinity. We also played churches in Harlem and in Spanish Harlem, which was a world I had not seen before and it was a great learning experience. And those kids killed us in basketball.

Zeltmann: Did you think church was really influential on your life?

Van Nostrand: No. I got a great sense of value from my family. Church was not a negative, but it was not a formative experience.

Zeltmann: Right. Then, besides tennis and soccer, what were some of the other things you did in high school?

Van Nostrand: I was a good student and I liked the academic part of high school. I liked academics all the way through. But I was also involved in a lot of activities. I was president, vice president of some clubs—National Honor Society, I was in the Jersey Boy's State—do you know what that is?

Zeltmann: No.

Van Nostrand: It's an honor. They only choose a few kids at each school to do it.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: And then there was the social side. I loved going driving or cruising with my friends. I loved going to dances. I loved going to football games. Again, I state ideal. It was really a positive, fun experience.

Zeltmann: And then also, I know the Vietnam War began in 1955, so while you were grow up— How old were you then, in 1955?

Van Nostrand: Ten.

Zeltmann: OK. So, then, did you know that was starting. Did you follow national politics—I mean, not at ten necessarily, but going through your high school experience?

Van Nostrand: Media was certainly different then. Up until I was ten, or maybe up until I was eight, we didn't have a TV.

Zeltmann: Yeah, I guess.

Van Nostrand: And there were big events like that, getting your first TV and stuff like that. But, I was not aware of Vietnam. The only thing I was really aware of was the Cold War, you know, and the U.S./ Russia relationships post World War II and in school we had the atomic bomb drills, where you would go under your desk and we probably had them more often than fire drills.

Zeltmann: Really?

Van Nostrand: Yeah. The paranoia was associated with nuclear attack rather than Vietnam. I wasn't aware of Vietnam I wouldn't say until maybe senior year in high school or my first year in college.

Zeltmann: OK. And then how did you hear about Gettysburg (College) and why did you decide to come here?

Van Nostrand: We had done good research. And I narrowed it down to four schools—Gettysburg, Franklin and Marshall, Williams, and Amherst. And we visited all of them and, this is not quantifiable, but there was a vibe here and I loved the campus, I still do. Whenever I come here, I won't today [It was raining the day of the interview], but on a nice day, I'll walk all over the campus. And the students were extremely welcoming. Back then, I remember stopping—we did the same weekend, we went to Franklin and Marshall one day and Gettysburg another day—and Franklin and Marshall was all men. And that was off putting to me. It didn't seem like a real world. It probably still wouldn't. But, as we walked through, students were kind and openly said hi and we asked a couple of professors for directions and they would be very helpful. And so, it was less an academic choice and more a social and ascetic choice and I am glad that I made it.

Zeltmann: That's good. Did you have an idea of what you were going to do, in high school, before you came to Gettysburg?

Van Nostrand: Yeah, I wanted to be an English professor.

Zeltmann: OK. And what made you decide you wanted to be an English professor?

Van Nostrand: I think like a lot of people, I was good at it. And I read voraciously, and I loved books. And I loved—well, not all my teachers, you know, some were OK, but some were fabulous—so I loved the combination of reading and literature and teaching.

Zeltmann: Did you have a favorite teacher, who like pushed you in that direction or was to more so just your love of reading that—?

Van Nostrand: Well, oddly enough, the teacher who pushed me in that direction in high school wasn't an English teacher, it was a lady named Catherine McBair who was just out of college. She was probably twenty-two at the time, but she took an interest in me and talked to me and asked me what I wanted to do. She is the one who pushed me in that direction.

Zeltmann: OK. How did she push you in some of those ways?

Van Nostrand: There were times after class; there were times between her periods, or like lunch would come after her period and she would take five minutes and she would talk to me and she would flatter me and ask me what I like and told me that she thought that would be a good direction. When you're seventeen, flattery works; it probably works at any age.

Zeltmann: Yeah.

Van Nostrand: But it really worked then.

Zeltmann: Did you have a favorite book—?

Van Nostrand: Yeah, my favorite book—it still is, and I probably read it every year—is *the Great Gatsby*. Have you read it?

Zeltmann: Not yet...

Van Nostrand: To me, it is perfect. But I still read some old, but more current now.

Zeltmann: Right...So, what were some of the other things you did on campus?

Van Nostrand: Well, I'll start by giving you a bigger picture, if that is OK.

Zeltmann: That is fine.

Van Nostrand: It was really special to come here. Again, I talk about how the place felt so good. I lived in Rice Hall. I met a bunch of new friends. I loved going to the football games. We had, if it is possible for you to even fathom, we had mandatory Chapel, every Thursday we had to go to Chapel.

Zeltmann: Oh, really?

Van Nostrand: Yeah. And we had back then first semester fraternity rush. It was instant. Within a week or two of you getting there. And I got rushed into Phi Gamma Delta, right across from here, and that became a big part of my life, you know, it was like instant friends. I liked the brothers who were already there; I liked the guys in my pledge class. Greek life ruled at that point; less so now, I know. And that became a big part of my life. And, I liked a lot of the functions--we had the things like faculty teas, which were nice, and tons of professors would come, and it would allow you to see them out of their normal room. You know, and chat with them and talk to some professors you didn't have, and it was really a pleasant experience. We had a house mother, you know, who--you know that concept?

Zeltmann: I have heard of them.

Van Nostrand: Yeah, she lived in our house with us, and that was nice. We dressed for Sunday dinner; coat and tie for Sunday dinner, I mean, it was a long time ago. And as a pledge, we did not have hazing as you would know it, but you would have to do certain things. You know, you would have to wash the dishes, clean the house. The worst job was being the wake-up guy. You had to get up early and spend your morning—except when you had class—waking other brothers up. So, they would all put this little tag that said they wanted to get up at 7:30 to get to their 7:50 class and then they would "rah, I don't want to get up!" so that was the worst job.



Zeltmann: So, you were a human alarm clock?

Van Nostrand: That's right. Oh yeah. But I loved the special weekends, house parties. The Christmas house party was unique for us. The fraternity had a tradition that went way back of two things. One is we had a relationship with a farmer who let us cut down greens. we would take it back to the fraternity house decorate the outside, but also decorate the entire first floor with greenery on the walls. The walls were covered in Greenery.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: However, the fire marshal required that the heat could not be on, so for about a week we lived with no heat. Guys would bring their dates home for Christmas house parties and no one really had an idea of what anybody's dates looked like because they were covered up and they had a hat and you could only see their eyes. We also had a long history of hayrides out in the apple orchards. Originally it was done by horses but that was a long time until John Deere tractors would take us and there would be a keg on flatbeds behind it and people would bring guitars and sing and drink beer and it was a really nice experience. I like traditions like that. I like ritual and I like traditions.

Zeltmann: Right. So, what was it like having a house mother? And who was the house mother?

Van Nostrand: Well, it was Gertrude Epistein.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: Going back, I would probably should say she was mid-60s when I got here. It was nice. I think--I know it lent a sense of decorum. As you know, teenage boys can you get out of control, but there was an unwritten rule that when she was around you were cool, you treated her with at least respect; and I really think she served a great purpose. I also like to play cards. I like playing bridge. And she played bridge. So, a lot of times three of the brothers and she would

play. And she would eat with us. She ate at the head table, so someone would pull out her chair. It was a decorous experience.

Zeltmann: OK, and then also I know some in the 60's would had the first-year traditions like wearing the cappies [These were called dinks], (and) things like that. Did you experience any of that?

Van Nostrand: It was right at the end of that, but the freshmen were supposed to. I don't recall ever wearing mine and I don't I don't think people could tell from walking around campus if it was a freshman or not.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: Although I don't recall wearing mine, but there were a lot of people wearing them.

Zeltmann: How long are people wearing them for if you remember?

Van Nostrand: I don't know.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: I mean it was at least weeks.

Zeltmann: Right and then also what was it like to just rush so quickly to a fraternity?

Van Nostrand: It was truly a rush; [it] is a roaring one. You got an idea from talking to guys in your dorm who you should go see who and who you shouldn't go see because some guys would go to one and other guys would go to another. And you would come back and compare notes and you would quickly narrow it down. And once you narrowed it down you would go back to them and you would talk to different brothers and I particularly like talking to guys who had been there for a while and who had experienced the whole fraternity life. And I would also talk to guys who would be thinking about pledging there, too, and I would talk to them, but it was a

truly a world wind and they treat you really well I mean they feed you well and put their arms around you and it's a really welcoming experience and shortly thereafter you're waking them up and waiting on tables.

Zeltmann: Did you do anything else on campus besides the fraternity?

Van Nostrand: Well most of the stuff was through the fraternity and intramural sports were through the fraternity.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: I played tennis I played soccer through the fraternity. But other than studies and intramural sports and the fraternity, nothing else. That was essentially my life here.

Zeltmann: What were some of the classes that you took?

Van Nostrand Mostly English classes.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: When I started, there was a mandatory reading class there was Phys Ed and health back then. does that still exist?

Zeltmann: No.

Van Nostrand: People get their own our own exercise now in the gym.

Zeltmann: Yes.

Van Nostrand: But, that's essentially the track.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: I remember a couple of the English professors were uniquely--the head of the department was a man named Dr. [Richard] Geyer who is in a group way, way out of central casting. He had a tweed jacket and he had a pipe and he really looked the part of the English professor. I would like to say that's him and he carried himself that way and commanded respect

that way. There was also a professor named Emile Schmidt who in 1963/64, had long hair before anyone did, but he was an English professor, so he could be sort of a Bohemian type guy at that point, which I think attracted some people to him.

Zeltmann: Did you have a favorite professor on campus?

Van Nostrand: I think Dr. Geyer was my favorite. Some of that was what he taught and how he taught and some of it was just what he represented.

Zeltmann: ...When you were on campus were there any peace progress when you started your Gettysburg experience?

Van Nostrand: No, I don't recall any when I was originally here. When I came back it was kicking around the door. It was all over.

Zeltmann: And then where you in ROTC?

Van Nostrand: No.

Zeltmann: OK. What were your friends like on campus?

Van Nostrand: Most of my friends were in this fraternity, some weren't, but they were mostly guys who were somewhat athletic, like to have fun, most came from similar backgrounds middle class. I mean, I could say white, but that's all that anyone here was back at that time. There was no diversity at that point.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: So, yeah, they were mostly guys from New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and similar backgrounds. One of the things about being here at the time, and it's something I still like now, is the living situations--that everything is in one place, period, that the classes are accessible, the football game, you don't have to join the team, plays, concerts and I'll say this in

all and I'll say this in all honesty, you'll understand, and even girls are right there, you know what I mean?

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: Yes, so I mean, it was a change from your life when you were in high school.

Zeltmann: Did you work on campus?

Van Nostrand: No, I worked in the summers, but I did not work on campus.

Zeltmann: What did you do over the summer?

Van Nostrand: Well I'll tell you two different things. I started when I was a kid doing newspaper routes and then in the summer I would work in a gas station or work in the nursery, but my family would also take a vacation to the Jersey Shore quite often and then at that time I wouldn't work and that was a ritual I enjoyed. My father would take our car to get ready for our 75-minute trip down to the shore... It was something. We would go to the same house. I would always help; we did things like one day we go crabbing and one day we would go to amusement park or something like that. But [it was a] great life on the shore. Also, my whole family would go.

Zeltmann: Like whole family, including aunts and uncles?

Van Nostrand: Aunts and uncles and grandmothers and I never knew either grandfather but of my grandfathers died in the '30s, both in accidents. So, more females, and my mom was the most positive, optimistic person I have ever met--except for perhaps her mom--and my mom is still alive, she just celebrated her 98th birthday two weeks ago.

Zeltmann: Oh wow.

Van Nostrand: And her mom died when, I believe, she was 94. So, something can be said about those good genes but also, I think about their view towards life my mom found good and continues to find good in everything. It was a wonderful experience.

Zeltmann: How did you feel about your dad growing up?

Van Nostrand: Like I said, my mom was there more than my dad and I respected my dad. My dad played in a work softball league and when I got to be maybe 15 or 16, one of the guys couldn't play. He asked me to come play with him with all the grown-up men and it was like--oh my heart--this was like the greatest thing that has ever been asked of me--and I still have his bat. I have his bat against the fireplace in my house now. It was so good. So, my dad's relationship with me was a respectful one. There was love but it was respectful whereas with my mom, it was full-on embraceable.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: This is a side [story], but I will tell you my older sister Lynn came home from high school and she might have been 14 or 15 at the time and that's when Mom would come to sit down and talk with her and they did it and she said, "I have a complaint life is too boring. The girls at school talk about their parents fighting and this has happened, and this has happened." And my mom said, "that's not going to change, dear." There was no divorce then. No one divorced then. Even from a young age you could see couples that didn't want to be with each other, but no one divorced.

Zeltmann: Right. What was your relationship like with your sisters?

Van Nostrand: It was loving, and I was glad to be their big brother and they loved one of my friends came over, but there was huge gap when I left for college my sisters were eleven and eight, you know, so there was a huge age gap. So, it wasn't that we were into any of the same things, but it was a loving relationship and still is and we see each other all the time I still see high school friends all the time and college friends all the time too...

Zeltmann: How did you end up entering the Army? Were you drafted?

Van Nostrand: Here comes the story that's going to change your opinion of me completely. You're going to think that I'm the stupidest guy in America. I had completed seven semesters at Gettysburg. And I left-- I was home on Christmas break in between semesters and friend of mine, who had left College couple of years ago before, came to our house and said, "I'm going to Miami. I know some people there. Do you want to go?" And I checked with the school, checked in with my parents who aren't happy at all. My father said, "I'll respect your decision, but I'm done supporting you, you know, when you come back (to) the school, you're going to have to pay for it yourself." And I said, "I understand." And I left, and I lived in Miami. And I'll digress here so I can answer your question that's probably on your mind. It took me years and years and years and years to figure out why I did that, and I think now I'm sure, the reason I did it was because I was terrified that this ideal life is going to end. So, I made sure it didn't. So now I'm the stupidest guy in America, but it all worked out. I went to Miami and we were getting by strangely on gambling on playing cards.

Zeltmann: Oh, OK. Were you living in apartment or something [like that]?

Van Nostrand: We were living with some other people.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: Who nicely took us in for free. You know we only paid for groceries. And the draft came to my home in New Jersey and my parents forwarded it to me and I had to go.

Zeltmann: ...so, where did you have basic training and all of that?

Van Nostrand: I'll start with some advice I got. I went down to the Induction Center in Newark New Jersey and I went in on my birthday. My friend had told me [while in the] Induction Center, "sit down in the chair as low as you can." And I said, "why?" And he said, "because quite often the Navy recruiters will come in and they will often take a few guys and they will pick the

biggest guys they see.” And that happened when I was there. A Marine sergeant came in and just pointed at five guys and said, “come with me.” And they were drafted into the Marines. I went from the Newark Induction Center to Fort Knox in Louisville, Kentucky and I had gotten two pieces of advice before I started basic--one was very mundane and the other is very important. The mundane one was take a top bunk because it is much easier to make the bed. Which is important in basic training because if your bed has one little crease outline you're going to have to do extra push-ups or any of that stuff. So that was a good tip. The other, “be invisible. Make no noise at all. You don't want the sergeant to know your name.” And that was a great tip, because some guys mouthed back [and] mouthed off to the point where they were always called out always doing extra push-ups, extra everything, having to skip meals, running far, and some guys got so much to the case where they had to repeat basic training, which is terrible. Basic training was a real slap in the face. You know I think typically as a kid in America, or probably in any country, you think you've got life pretty well planned out and you have opinions and that's natural, you know that.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And in the Army, and it's necessary particularly if you are enlisted, you can't have opinions. You can't go into a battle situation and have the person in charge say, “here is what we're going to do,” can't raise your hand and say, “I think we should do this.” There's no time for that. So, what they do is they really deprogram any individual thinking and make you follow the rules. They also get you into incredible physical shape. I remember the first day getting my haircut and I had to pay for it and I thought that doesn't sound right!

Zeltmann: No, that doesn't.



Van Nostrand: And we were at Fort Knox-- and it was September and October-- here in Kentucky, and we would fall out in the morning it was 6am and we would fall out and get into our formation and make sure everything is there and they would have us have--oh, here's democracy at work-- and we could decide if we would wear our uniform with you know t-shirt and the regular army shirt and a jacket. And at that point we had to decide which we were going to wear all day. We didn't have a weather report, so there were days it would be cold in the morning and warm up and we we're just sweating our butts off because we have our jackets on. And then other days we would freeze because the previous day we are going [in] t-shirts and freeze, but then again, it's kind of getting the group mentality to going. I got to know some guys in basic training and I respected some guys, but you don't really build relationships because you're constantly working.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: You're learning how to do things. You're either doing physical exercise, learning how to shoot, learning how to run, learning how to assemble rocks to climb over, and things like that. It was eight weeks. I was about 200 pounds when I went in and after eight weeks I weighed 155.

Zeltmann: Oh, wow. When did you start basic training?

Van Nostrand: Just about September 1st of 1967. From basic training you go to Advanced Training and it's fairly typical for them to not know exactly what they're going to do with you right away. I wasn't eligible to go to infantry training because I do not have 20/20 (vision). So, they had to figure out something for me to do. Of maybe two weeks where I was still at Fort Knox, I wasn't assigned to anything. I was just waiting for my next orders.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: For the first week and a half, I was given a rake and from 8 in the morning until 6 at night, there was a quad, like a quad in a college, and my job was to make sure there was never a leaf on the ground in that quad. That's what I did. You know it's as mundane as can be.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: The next job I got was dramatically different and I only had it for I think three days before my orders came in and that was, I was one of two people running a road gang. This is soldiers who are in the brig in the front of the army base and they're off picking up trash off the highway and I have a shotgun. I learned how to shoot a shotgun, but I don't want to shoot anyone. And they tell you, "if someone starts running, fire (a) shot over their head. If they keep running, fire (a) shot at their feet." And they said, "particularly if they are running at you, do the same thing." I don't think I could have done it-- and luckily, it never happened.

Zeltmann: That's good.

Van Nostrand: No kidding. So, I got assigned to Fort Rucker, Alabama, which was an aviation base and what I learned there was to be an aviation operations specialist. I really embraced this. And the job that I ended up having in Vietnam was that. I would, with other people, organize the aircraft needed for operations whether they were assaults or resupply or even like Bob Hope... You know, Bob Hope would come with a USO ship with the troops.

Zeltmann: Oh, OK.

Van Nostrand: So, we were in charge of doing that. And I loved what they taught me, and I graduated number one in my class and I was really proud of that. I think there were only 70 people in my class. And it all made sense to me, certain things. The other stuff they taught me about. The only thing I didn't like about Fort Rucker is on weekends we had to put (this was November into January) we had to put Christmas decorations on the officer houses. And putting

up Christmas decorations in 70 to 80 degrees didn't feel right to me. But, you did what you had to.

Zeltmann: So, how did you end up going to the airbase in... Phu Loi<sup>1</sup>?

Van Nostrand: Well, at the end of my aviation training in Alabama, the sergeant comes out and he has a list of all of the names of those who--well, it was a seventy person class and he reads, I think it was five or six names--and he says, "You six are going to--I don't know, this base in Germany." Then he pauses, and he goes, "the rest of you, the sixty-four of you, are going to Vietnam." You always held out hope that you weren't.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And my heart sank, but you have to go. You get leave before you go and it's hard, you know, saying goodbye to your friends, it's hard saying goodbye to your parents, because you don't know if you are going to see them again. It is terribly hard. And I went.

Zeltmann: ...How did your parents react to when you were drafted and then going to Vietnam?

Van Nostrand: I don't remember a reaction to me being drafted. But their reaction to me going to Vietnam was, I think what any loving parent would be, you know, to please stay in touch. Please be safe. Do whatever you can to stay safe and that is pretty much it. You know, the communication is negligible. My mom said, "write me letters. You know, I don't care what you have for dinner that night but write me letters."

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And I did. And I also asked them and friends to do the same for me. And they did too.

Zeltmann: Yeah.

---

<sup>1</sup> Phu Loi was an American Army Base, used between 1965-1972 in the northern section of Saigon, in southern Vietnam.

Van Nostrand: And there was no ability to call at all.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: So, the old-fashioned snail mail and it was very snail going from the US to Vietnam, but that was how it happened. And when you got those letters it was like Christmas.

Zeltmann: Right. How often did you get letters?

Van Nostrand: I would say three, sometimes four, a week. I had a great coterie of people who were taking care of me through mail.

Zeltmann: That's good.

Van Nostrand: Yup, it was good. I also had my mom and a friend--this may not compute but--and I will get into ways of life--sent me spices, so that we could take the bland food and make it taste better and it was wonderful. So, I left from Fort Dix, New Jersey and went to San Francisco. And in San Francisco we took off on a commercial plane to Tokyo. No--we went from San Francisco to Alaska, and then Alaska to Tokyo and Tokyo to Vietnam.

Zeltmann: That must have been quite a flight, all the way around.

Van Nostrand: Yes.

Zeltmann: What was it like when you first got there?

Van Nostrand: It was a shock. You know, I had seen some of the stuff on TV, but just this landscape, it is either nothing or a jungle, except for Saigon, which was a city and I got there a few times, but other than that. And we flew into Saigon and then flew into Phu Loi. And, I don't want to make this sound as good as college, but the people were terribly welcoming. Wonderful, wonderful. Officers and enlisted guys, really welcoming. Glad to see. And I was welcoming as people came after that. Nobody tells you to do it. I think it is because you all realize you are in this boat together, so you better be friends. You are going to need each other's help. So, I had a

very interesting experience before I got my job, 'cause it is not pure the timing of when the guy before you are leaving and your coming. So, I got there, and I had about a week before my job would start. So, for that week, I got to be on night patrol on the perimeter of the airbase. So, I'm on this, you know, like it's sandbagged and--I don't remember if I was on a chair or on my knees, it must have been a chair behind me--and I was sitting behind this machine gun. And you are wired up on hip side and there was a lieutenant--I believe it was a lieutenant--who was in charge of the whole thing. There were guys like me around the whole base. And people reported in. This is the best story--I never ended up shooting at anyone. There was no land attack at the time. We were getting attacked by mortars all the time; rockets would come in. But there was no ground attack. However, we are up there one night, it might have been the second or third night I am there, and one of the guys comes on and he says, "I see something moving and it's big." And the lieutenant said, "What is it?" The guy goes, "I can't tell ya'. Just keep watching." And the guy comes back on and he goes, "It's a cow!" And the lieutenant says, "One cow or more than one?" And the guy goes, "I only see one right now." And the lieutenant goes, "If it turns into more than one, or it starts moving forward, kill it." And I found out later that the [Viet] Cong and the Northern Vietnamese army would use cows to come across minefields.

Zeltmann: Oh, to set off the mines?

Van Nostrand: To set off the mines and then they would follow them in. So that was our bovine attack experience. Luckily, the cow didn't come, so we didn't shoot it.

Zeltmann: That's good. Lucky for the cow.

Van Nostrand: That's right. I mean, who wants to shoot anything?

Zeltmann: Yeah, right.

Van Nostrand: So, I eventually got assigned. I had a big advantage. I mean, everything is relative. I wasn't sweeping in the jungle; I was out on the airbase. And my home is what you call a hooch. And it's a concrete slab with canvas dividers dividing up rooms and at some stages there would be metal poles and then a corrugated metal roof on top and screens and doors on the front. And there would be two of us to in each hooch and there would be maybe ten hootches all along there. Kind of like a dorm, but not as nice. So, inside my hootch-mate and I would each have a cot and we had shelves made out of cinder blocks and wood and stored stuff either under our bed or on the shelves. And the first thing they teach you--two things. And the first one is going to sound gross, but it's true. They say sleep on your back and sleep like this [Van Nostrand takes his arms and crossed them around his chest] because if you sleep like this [Van Nostrand shows his arms as if they were dangling over a bed], the rats will come up and bite your fingers.

Zeltmann: Oh.

Van Nostrand: And I woke up one time with a rat on my face.

Zeltmann: Oh, really?

Van Nostrand: A wet rat on my face. It must have been the most terrified I had ever been. And the other thing is--have your shoes and your pants set up so if a rocket attack starts, you can jump into them instantly. And depending on your status at that time, you would either go to the bunker, to stay out of the way of the rockets, or go to where you work to help fend off the attack.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: So, that is how that started. Then I went to work, and I worked with a fairly large crew. In the operations center, there may have been five or six people. But I had the same job as two other guys, who became my best friends there. And we would work from six in the morning to six at night, and then you were off 24 hours. And then, obviously, your next shift would be

from six at night to six in the morning. So, it was hard to get into a regular life, but like anything else, you are young, so you can accommodate yourself into that life. At first, sleeping is hard since it is a different type of day, but we got into it. Like I said, what we did was we would schedule primarily helicopters, but sometimes fixed winged planes too, from all over to pick up troops and food and medical supplies and sometimes doctors and nurses and resupply anything and get them from one place to another. Sometimes, if it was an assault, you were employing at different types of things--different types of attack helicopters and then troop helicopters. We worked with US troops. We worked with South Vietnamese. We worked with Australians. We worked with Koreans. It was interesting, and I thought a good sense of accomplishment. It was not my nature to want to hurt someone, but it is my nature to want to do my job right, so I made sure I did my job extremely well. Occasionally, I would go up and fly. My commanding officer would put us up and put us on the headset. Sometimes even he sat in the door gunner seat and we would look down at the ground and if something was there, you know, you had to shoot. But I never saw a person that I had to shoot. But there were times you know we were lifting kids and carrying them in medical straight off the ground and there were times guys wouldn't get off the helicopter and they were pushed off. It was sad, but there was a job you had to do, you know, if you were there, you had to do it.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: I will tell you the saddest thing that I experienced and that was we were carrying infantry troops and we were all hooked up--and this was a big airlift....and I was on the headset and I could hear my commander and I could hear the infantry commander. And there was a big fire fight on the ground between the Cong and our guys. And the lieutenant on the ground called up and he said, "We have secured the area, what do you want us to do with the prisoners, sir?"

And the general in the helicopter said, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand you son.” And he said back, “Well, what do you want me to do with the prisoners?” And the general said, “I don’t believe you have any prisoners.”

Zeltmann: As in— [they were killed]?

Van Nostrand: As in—correct.

Zeltmann: Wow. How did you feel about the war while you were over there?

Van Nostrand: I was possessed with doing my job right. I was a United States citizen and my entire life I have loved my country. I still believe there is nothing like it. I have travelled around the world and I had a job to do and I did it to the best of my ability. I can best answer your question, perhaps, by saying when I came back to Gettysburg, the pro and antiwar factions were full blown. And I think I was probably comprised of either side since I had served, and I turned both sides down.

Zeltmann: And when was the first time you experienced rockets being launched onto the base?

Van Nostrand: Oh, I think it was the second week I was there? And then it became fairly common. I’ll get into some esoteric stuff on artillery. We would call in artillery when we would do the airlifts, it is calibrated and stacked, you know, this person would go here, and this person would go here [showing with his hands people going in straight line], ‘cause you think that is where you want to go. The North Vietnamese army would go in a crooked shape and then bend it a little bit, so you never knew where their rockets were going to land.

Zeltmann: Oh OK.

Van Nostrand: So, one might land over here [indicates to one direction] and the next one might land over there [indicates to other direction]. So, when the rocket attacks would come, the alarms would go off and like I said, I knew if I had to go into my work or I would go underground into



the bunker. The only distinct injury that occurred to me Vietnam was the alarm went off, and rockets were really landing, and I started running out of my hootch and I ran right into a T-post with a fire extinguisher on it and knocked my teeth out and (I lost) a couple of upper teeth. But, I got them back and I got them fully fixed when I got back to the states. But, kind of a yin and yang thing almost, there was a monsoon season in Vietnam. And serious rain. I mean, we have never experienced it here, except maybe during a hurricane or something. And it last and last and last. And it's bad because everything floods.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: But, it's good because there is no fighting.

Zeltmann: That's true.

Van Nostrand: Yeah. We are not flying. They're not walking. There was always rumors that Northern Vietnam had Chinese tanks. And we heard the rumor, we would get really scared, but we never saw any tanks coming. However, there were ground attacks, but we were never breached, and they would always come after rockets. But, I saw guys get killed--I didn't see them get killed. But, I saw them after they got killed and I saw plenty of people in body bags. And it's just luck of the draw. I knew that.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: I build up an incredible sense of appreciation. I think I have always had one. I think I got it from my family, but things like hot showers and refrigerators and dry socks and good food. And I have never forgotten that. And, I am not a preacher of any sorts, but every day after that has been a gift for me and I know that.

Zeltmann: Right. What was it like the first time you saw the bodies of soldiers? How did you react to that?

Van Nostrand: I'm not sure, exactly. The only thing I remember is someone said something to me, and I couldn't talk. I might have thrown up. I don't recall, but I remember someone asked me something and I couldn't respond.

Zeltmann: Right. And then what was it like when you had to oversee the missions...?

Van Nostrand: When I was doing that, it was--I don't want to say it was fun--but I was witnessing the tactical aspect of what I had put together.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: I would see the assault helicopters that I had ordered and come in on time and there was a thing called smoke, which was a big helicopter, a CH-47, a big fat one that carries troops. You may have seen them in the movies or something. And that guy comes in and spreads smoke on the ground so hopefully the enemy troops can't see anything and then our gunships come in and blast away and then our troops would come in and it's almost like a ballet, if done right. It is coordinated and choreographed, and I hate to call it a beautiful thing, but from my viewpoint, based on my job, it was.

Zeltmann: How often did you go on those?

Van Nostrand: I would say three or four times a month.

Zeltmann: OK. So how far would you go with those? Were they close to base?

Van Nostrand: Well, every organization in the army has an area that they oversee. So, we had ours and we used helicopter companies out of four other bases and there would be different infantry and medical teams and such in different locations. But we had the most and we had fixed wing in ours. So, everything was there, I would say, no more than twenty miles.

Zeltmann: OK. Then what was it like living on the base? I know you have talked a little bit about it, but like the soldier you stayed with, did you stay with him most of the time--?

Van Nostrand: Well, he had the same job as me, so two thirds of the time, we wouldn't see each other except during a briefing.

Zeltmann: Oh OK.

Van Nostrand: This is going to sound like this is out of a movie, we had two really nice things on our base. One was there was this big white wooden wall that they could show movies on. And we would all have folding chairs and we would go out and watch movies, you know. Real movies and for some reason we also had an outdoor swimming pool.

Zeltmann: Oh really?

Van Nostrand: Yeah. So, every once in a while, most of the officers used it, but it wasn't off limits. I would go there and use it. And another thing that made our area attractive to some people, our hootch area, was since we controlled the aircraft, we could get people rides places. And we would trade--you know, if one of the cooks wanted a ride to Saigon and a helicopter was going to there, and we would say, "OK. We want six steaks or four pounds of ground beef, we'll give you a ride." And we would get the spices and we would buy some potatoes and stuff from the local Vietnamese people and we would make a pretty good meal over Bunsen burners. And people would smell it, and they would come. So, that was a nice aspect of our life there.

Zeltmann: What was the normal army food that you ate most days?

Van Nostrand: It was bland. It was always a potato and an overcooked vegetable and there was always some type of meat, but I remember most of the time, it was steak, because there were a lot of cows. It wasn't great steak, but it was steak.

Zeltmann: Yeah, it was something....

Van Nostrand: I would occasionally go to Saigon myself and that was interesting in that, when I was R&R--do you know what that means?

Zeltmann: No.

Van Nostrand: OK, I'll tell you about that in a minute.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: I went to Saigon and mostly they would tell you don't eat anything, especially from a street vendor, because it may have organisms that could get you. Not that they were going to poison you, but they could just make you sick.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: So mostly we would go to outdoor cafes and drink beer and watch stuff. But there were parts of Saigon that were like a city. Not as nice as an American city, but most of it was like alleys and street vendors and carts and stuff like that. When I went on R&R, I went to Bangkok, which was a fascinating city. R&R means rest and recreation.

Zeltmann: Oh OK.

Van Nostrand: And I got, I believe, five days. And you had a choice of eight different places to go. Australia, I believe Tokyo was on the list and I went to Bangkok. Bangkok has this unbelievable mix of opulent temples--I mean, with the gold plated Buddhas and things--and abject poverty right next door and then repeat that and repeat that and repeat that. But it was a great amount of beauty. I remember flowers in Bangkok; they were spectacular. You could take trips down the river. It was getting to see a country and a way of life I had never seen. The indigenous Vietnamese who worked for us. We had ladies called Hootch Girls. The main thing was, they would do our laundry, sew our buttons, do stuff like that. They were nice people. They attempted to learn English. They would speak a language, part Vietnamese, part French, because the French were there before we were.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Vietnam was a French colony until 1955.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And part English. And I found most of them to be very good people. Now, the rumor had been, all Vietnamese raised two flags and they flew the flag of whoever controlled their area, but I never felt in any of them traitorous thoughts or even would have been. Maybe I was lucky, but I never felt that.

Zeltmann: Yeah. What was it like--the change in culture in Vietnam?

Van Nostrand: I mean, it's night and day.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: I didn't have to worry about what I was going to wear. I had no car. I had no girlfriend. No good food. Some days there were no showers. Like I said, I got by trying to be, and most of the time achieving, the best I could be at my job. I was totally focused on my job. And when I was off and not sleeping, I was enjoying friends that I had... But I mean, it's culture shock.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: You know, I didn't get to go to the Saigon prom.

Zeltmann: Yeah. So, did you have any interesting stories that you would like to share (from Vietnam)?

Van Nostrand: Yes. Another decision came up that may reinforce me to be the stupidest person ever. But that one worked out too. In the army, when you are drafted, you serve for two years. And if you are ending your time of service at that time in Vietnam with five months or less left, they let you out at nineteen months, just because it wouldn't be worth retraining you, relocating you, blah, blah, blah.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: So, my time in Vietnam was five months and five days. So, I could make the choice to stay and extra five days and it was agonizing because there were apocryphal tales of guys who had stayed one day [extra] and died.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And we were under heavy shelling at that time. But the world had changed so much in America, and I wanted to see it. The music had changed. The styles had changed.

Attitudes had changed. Things looked really exciting, you know, and I wanted to experience it. I didn't want to go back to some army base, I wanted to go back to the summer in the states and go stay at the beach for the summer, and then go back to Gettysburg. And I chose to stay the five days. And the last couple of days, my commanding officer, a great guy, said, "if you want to spend your last couple of days, your replacement is here, just stay in the bunker, if you want."

And I did. It worked out.

Zeltmann: ...So, what was it like transitioning back to Gettysburg and to life in general?

Van Nostrand: Well, like I said, so much had changed. Whereas when I left, most people still had relatively short hair--men. And no one was taking drugs and [or involved in] protests. While they had existed around the country, they hadn't come to Gettysburg yet, or I don't recall [any].

But when I came back, it was totally different. I'll digress and tell you a quick story. When I wrote from Vietnam to the Dean of Admissions, saying I wanted to come back in the Fall of 1969, I got a letter back saying, "you're in. Understand any returning student is automatically are on probation and here are the terms of that probation." One of which, you cannot have a car. And I wrote back, and I said, "there are people out here trying to kill me every day, and you are telling me I can't have a car?" And they waived it, which was great.

Zeltmann: Yeah.

Van Nostrand: So, I got back, and attitudes were different. People were mad. There were riots and real hatred in America. And I didn't want to be part of that. I would talk to people and I would tell real basic stories, but I wouldn't take a side and if someone wanted to really get dramatic, pro war or antiwar, I would walk out of the room. I didn't want it. I wanted to compartmentalize that part of my life, like I keep coming back to, I was proud of what I did. I was not proud of being in a war, but I was proud of the job I did for my country.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: And, you have seen these people. I shouldn't say these people, that's a bad thing to say--but you've seen people like on *Rolling Thunder*,<sup>3</sup> where there are guys my age and younger, who Vietnam is their identity. You know what I mean?

Zeltmann: Yes.

Van Nostrand: And, I did not want Vietnam to be my identity. I wanted to come back and start my regular life over again. And other things had changed here. When I left, the campus was dry, and when I came back, the second semester, the campus was wet. The campus had gone from no booze on campus, to booze on campus. It's not like that now, is it?

Zeltmann: It depends [on the event].

Van Nostrand: Oh, OK. But I mean, it was legal. Gettysburg when I was first here was five courses and two semesters. And we had switched to four-one-four. January was a single term.

Zeltmann: Oh, OK.

Van Nostrand: You don't have that now?

Zeltmann: No, we don't.

---

<sup>3</sup> A 1977 movie about a Vietnam veteran coming home after the war who is treated like a hero.

Van Nostrand: I know some colleges do have it now. And that was good too. And, this is a digress story, but this is a fun story. Here is a professor who really struck me. The January course I took was called *Novels and Film*, which is exactly what it sounds like--we read books and watched movies. It was taught by a young professor, long, blond hair. It was the first real hippie professor I had ever seen--Bob Frederickson. Great, cool guy. Made a great impression on me. And often, he would invite us to his house for the class, sit on the floor. And the only requirement was choosing one of the novels or films--I think we did three-- and write a paper on it. It's coming up to the end of that single semester and Dr. Frederickson said, "Here is an incredible guy--Bob Dylan. He is going on tour, and he is in Baltimore, Philadelphia, DC. And I want to go see all the concerts. So, I won't have time to look at your papers until this semester is long gone. So, I will eventually get to them and give you feedback. But I'm going to see Bob Dylan. So, I'd like to make you an offer--I will give you all a B." This has been a fun class, this has been an easy class. I don't think B in a January semester hurts anyone. "So, will you take it?" And all of us took it except for one guy who said, "My work is superb. I want you to grade it." You know where this ends up, right?

Zeltmann: How?

Van Nostrand: We went and saw the grades book and he was the only C.

Zeltmann: Of course.

Van Nostrand: Yeah, but it was different. I mean, people in tie-dye and people wearing bandanas and like I said, flag burning and to a lot of people, class became secondary to cause. There is this thing called Symposium '70 that you can look up, and invited antiwar people, big deal antiwar people, from around the country. And some students got in big trouble for that.

Zeltmann: How often were there burning of the draft slips or things like that on campus?



Van Nostrand: I don't recall. You know the big universities, Columbia, that was one of the main places, Chicago. On Gettysburg, there would be bonfires in the parking lot and people around it and signing songs and chanting and holding up signs and things like that.

Zeltmann: OK...so, you spent nine semesters at Gettysburg, then right?

Van Nostrand: Correct.

Zeltmann: OK. So, when you graduated in May 1970, there was the whole Kent State shooting. How did that affect your views on the war and also what happened here on campus with that?

Van Nostrand: The Kent State thing made me so, so sad. The people who did shoot, they were not army men, they were National Guard. Not fully trained. From what I can tell, that the officers who were should have been in charge in them, weren't. And this is what I have heard, you know, I wasn't there.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: It shouldn't have happened, and it made me terribly sad. I think there is accountability on both sides. The soldiers--or National Guard troops--shouldn't have been doing it and from what I understand, they warned the kids. But if I was warned they were going to shoot, I wouldn't have kept coming. I think they didn't believe them. And if you get some National Guard guy, he is going to be like some kid like me, eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old. He doesn't know. He has his finger on the trigger. I don't know if he wants to pull it or not, but he did.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: He has his safety off and his finger right there and he pulled it. He might have felt threatened. So, again, I'm not on a side, but my reaction was terrible sorrow.

Zeltmann: What was the rest of the campus like with that?

Van Nostrand: I think it was similar. It was a moment in time and I think it. For people who were about to be radicalized, were radicalized. And I think there were those who said they had it coming, and it radicalized them in the other direction. But I think the bulk of people felt this is just an example of terrible things that are going on in the country right now.

Zeltmann: And what was your reaction when the war was finally over?

Van Nostrand: I was way past it at that time. It wasn't like World War I or World War II, where there was an armistice and the war stopped.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: This was a dribble, dribble, dribble and then you saw the last pictures of people getting on the helicopters to get out and I saw those on the news. But it wasn't yes; I didn't feel relieved 'cause it had come over a large period of time. I had moved on. I will tell you that and I don't think at least it is a cognitive decision on my part, but I told you earlier, I have friends from kindergarten, I have friends from grade school, high school, college, I still see. I have friends from all my jobs that I see. I don't see anyone from Vietnam.

Zeltmann: And then, how did your impressions change of the college once you graduated? Just because you had that gap since you were in Vietnam.

Van Nostrand: I still love this place. I loved it then, I love it now. I come back every year, I play in the golf tournament at the reunion week. A bunch of people come back and play. Some years I stick around for the reunion stuff. A lot of years, I just play golf with my buddies and see others and get dinner, go back the next day. But this is different for me, because there are students here. And when we come back for that, there are no students, and I wish it was a nicer day, I like seeing the college with students. Now, you are going to think this is strange, knowing what you

know now and how old I am, but I have a stepson, who is a freshman at the University of Delaware. I even have a stepson who is a high school student. So, I like seeing students.

Zeltmann: Yeah. Oh, did you continue with your fraternity and did tennis and all of that when you came back to Gettysburg?

Van Nostrand: I continued intramural sports, yeah. I don't know how it is now--it was an important thing for your fraternity to win in intramural sports.

Zeltmann: Oh OK, yeah.

Van Nostrand: And the fraternities still had identities, sororities had identities. The identities hadn't changed. They were still very similar. One really nice thing for me was having started in 1963 and leaving in 1970, I know ten years of students. Follow that?

Zeltmann: Yeah, that's true.

Van Nostrand: So, it was nice to know people from all those eras and I am still in touch with some people from the beginning and the end. I'll see some of them tonight.

Zeltmann: Right. And how was that transitioning back, since you had such a gap between when you first were here and after the war? Just transitioning with friends and everything?

Van Nostrand: Well, I certainly matured, you know, both by year and by war.

Zeltmann: Right.

Van Nostrand: But, I'll go back to what I said before, the biggest thing was this greatly enhanced my appreciation. Happy to have my friends, happy to see my friends and everyone else. It was a big embrace.

Zeltmann: And then after you graduated, did you go on to graduate school?

Van Nostrand: This is kind of unique too. After I graduated, I travelled around the country for a little bit, visiting friends.

Zeltmann: OK.

Van Nostrand: And went to Pennsylvania, Texas, California. And came back east and I basically worked for two companies for the rest of my life. And now I am retired. My wife and I do a variety of business things from our house also. It has been great.

Zeltmann: OK. I think that is a good place to end it.