

Interviewee: Swanson, Helge
Interviewer: Carlos Fernandez
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Fernandez: Can you please introduce yourself?

Swanson: Yes, my name is Helge Swanson.

Fernandez: Mr. Swanson, are you aware that we are recording this?

Swanson: Yes I am.

Fernandez: Ok, the first question I would like to ask you is, Mr. Swanson, if you could start by a bit about your life before any involvement in Vietnam?

Swanson: Ok, my name is Helge Swanson. I am sixty years old. I was born in Santa Barbara, California, my father spent — his career in the military. I grew up on military bases, and with aspirations of becoming a soldier myself, I graduated from high school in 1963. That year I signed up for the Marine Corp Platoon leaders class and while attending Florida State through the sixties I attended officer candidate school in Quantico, Virginia several summers and the back drop of which I guess in that period of time of the very early sixties, I am thinking about nineteen my first trip to Quantico the first part of OCS the drill instructor started talking about “boy there’s one a coming” and that in 1964 many of them had already made the rounds and went to Vietnam as advisors and so I was introduced to the war fairly early on. I had not political or I suppose in that point in time no personal feelings about it whatsoever, but between 1964 and 1968 it became an eminent reality so it was a shaping factor in my adolescent and early adulthood.

Fernandez: So you were in the marines when they started sending people over to Vietnam?

Swanson: Yes, I was in the Marine Corp. This particular program was comparable to the Marine Corps version of ROTC and from 1964 till 1968 when I resigned my commission after completing OCS having changed my perspective on a military career and me as a soldier and Vietnam in particular.

Fernandez: Were you ever given orders to go to Vietnam?

Swanson: No, I completed officer candidate school and returned to FSU for my senior year and that was, that was pretty much the turning point for me in terms of the politics of the war and coming involved in that point, if not the antiwar movement, because there wasn’t a lot of

movement here locally in Tallahassee but certainly the antiwar sentiments and the political red rederict that began to emerge, and so I decided to apply for graduate school and was accepted and attempted to negotiate a delay on entry to the Marine Corp and they declined so I promptly exercised my right to resign and left. Of course the next five years all through graduate school, having not had enough active duty time to then have fulfilled my military commitment, I spent the next four or five years in various stages of being drafted, about to be drafted, or otherwise trying to get out of it including a number of different draft deferments so on and so forth.

Fernandez: What are some of your views toward the draft?

Swanson: Oh my gosh, well you know for me it was so ironic at the time coming on age in that period of time and also growing up in a military family the notion of obligation, duty and so forth was really pretty much central doctrine, uhhh — and so in my — as an adolescent and high school graduate and early college student and certainly as a marine I graduated near the top of my officer candidate class I was really good at it, I had fun, its like boys playing war it was great trip and something that I prided myself in and felt good about and so forth but along the way I began to be aware that certain elements of responsibility and duty and so forth which to me it seemed to be on one hand so um fundamental, over time it began to look absurd and the draft was central to that, you know this notion of obligatory military service on one hand seemed basic but then over time the horror stories, the problems and the people that I met along the way the closest, after leaving the Marine Corp the closest I came to being drafted was actually being sent to for my draft physical and pre-induction physical up in Montgomery, Alabama, and my God the stories that you heard there of course you know when guys get together and talk who knows what's true but the one that stuck with me all these years was a fellow that told me a story about a fellow who told me story about having got a marriage deferment and in the early days of the draft, you could get a marriage deferment. They were interested in single men, that was later abandoned. Well this particular young man got a marriage deferment and then also got involved in a nasty divorce where his wife called the draft board, after they were divorced he was reclassified 1A which was you know the, “we are about to get you status”. I was there for my physical, he was there being inducted, he was on his way and of course and no — in retrospect as I became more active politically you know and certainly in retrospect the notion of the draft as a fair and equitable way to, you know to round people up for service started looking more and more like the old British navy conscript approach, late one night clean out the bars and there were your sailors and they woke up on the boat. The power influence, my best buddy in high school his dad was a state senator he easily avoided all these problems. We know that from President Bush on there were lots of ways to get in reserve units and those were considered safe havens and there were doctors that would diagnose, the equatability was shot in my mind it remains so today by the fact that surprise, surprise, wealth and power tend to get you out of it and the poor kids, the honorable kids, the kids who never question this notion of duty or responsibility I call that honorable, all though its truly naive, they went and the rest of us didn't, I was smart enough to get into graduate school that kept me out long enough for me to, you may appreciate this get high blood pressure, which is why I didn't get inducted in Montgomery, out of the blue I was found to have high blood pressure so they sent me home. And that was my last

actual encounter with the draft, although when the lottery was introduced a couple of years later my birthday September 14, was double O one (OO1) it was somewhere along that point where I still looked at life comically when I started thinking oh my god there's a big, there's a target on my back, but my OO1 number occurred when I was at that point twenty-five, the military smartly was focusing on drafting eighteen and nineteen year olds and leaving us old overweight graduate students, and I have a new born and so forth, my experience with the draft like my whole general experience with Vietnam was that you know I am sure nobody set out to create a corrupt unfair system, it was, it was corrupt, it was unfair, you can buy your way in and out. It worked both ways, I had another friend who had dropped out of school which was a very dangerous thing to do because once you had your student deferment and you dropped out of school you were a prime target. He dropped out of school and was re-classed 1A, 2S was the student deferment. And so he went home to St. Petersburg and using his own personal connections got assigned to a Navy reserve unit which met once a month and drove boats around Tampa Bay, and he thought my god this is — you know I am home free, and late on night he got a call and they were told to meet in the reserve unit the next day where upon they were informed that they were going to be activated and shipped to San Diego equipped with river boats and sent immediately to Vietnam. So you know it was this big lottery and this big gamble, you know, and attempts to hide sometimes failed and attempts to hide worked, the number of people that left and took off to Canada, the number of people that took to, I mean I personally knew people that married to avoid the draft and so forth, so anyway you know these are just anecdotes, the essence of it was that the, the program basically captured the naive, it captured the poor it captured the disenfranchised and those us that had the means and the where we fall for the commitment or the anger, most of us found ways out of it.

Fernandez: Did you ever feel pressure, from your parents or family since it was a military style family to join?

Swanson: You know what an interesting question because you know my father; bless his heart never ever put pressure, directly on me. There was indirect pressure because as you know the news stories and there was massive amounts of media coverage and this built throughout the 1960's I forgot when the fall of Saigon was exactly plus or minus '71 or '72. I can remember my dad ranting and raving throughout the whole thing and news reports but when it came time to interact with me nothing was ever said, and while I loved him dearly and respected him dearly in years to come, I couldn't put it anywhere other than hypocrisy, a double standard obviously and I'm sure he was unaware of that cause my dad had a very profound sense of fairness but the message that I always got was "Hey whatever you do son is fine, but the rest of these guys are cowards" basically that, you know, what message do you get when your eighteen, nineteen, and twenty when you hear that from your dad, it was true double message, in the early days I had every intention of following through but once I had decided, no, no there is no way that I am getting involved in this fiasco, guilt, was always part of the equation. And if not guilt while I never got over pressure it was certainly covert if not intended from my father, my mother never commented one way or another, and I always go the sense that she was quite relieved, surprise, surprise, how many mothers in spite of what they may say and do really, really want their kids to

go into harms way, especially one that was getting uglier by the day. But the other part of guilt was that my college roommate was killed in Vietnam. One of my music buddies we played music together for years and years was killed in Vietnam and many of the friends from the era, people that I knew, acquaintances and my old age cohort, many of them were involved and to this day I have a nagging sense that, that perhaps I should of done what they were willing to do although intellectually that was insane, it's insane, it's like should I really have participated in this mass suicide because it was expected, intellectually its like a slam dunk. But you know, I have, I have, and I'm sure its not unusual at least enough of a sense of obligation and duty having been raised in that environment so that every now and then I feel, I feel, I pressure myself at least to revisit the question and I always comeback cause I can remember the day I decided I am through with this, that was a good decision, I have no questions about that but the guilt that is part of that whole era, and if I feel that as confident as I am that I made the right decision I can't help but wonder how that weighs on those who aren't so clear in their thinking.

Fernandez: Your father, did he participate in any major War?

Swanson: Yes, he was a fighter pilot, he participated in World War II and the Korean War. He was a Marine, he was my inspiration to become a Marine, ironically the only real criticism I got from him was the day I came home and told him that I had joined the Marines. He told me that was a really stupid thing to do, I should of joined the Air Force and of course in the conversation, and as it turned out the Marine Corp, never good to him beyond what the Marine Corp could do which was give you a group of guys that could scream and you know hang together, he talked about family benefits, pay, duty, stations, potential assignments, which basically argues don't do what I did pick a better branch of the service, if you must although he never said that. Now what's interesting about that is that to this day similar to what I was saying before I never sense any direct pressure from my father to become a military person or to follow in his footsteps and while he saw the young people of the day generically as failing to live up to their commitments as good citizens he just never projected that on me.

Fernandez: What was your training like? Was it regular like considered regular Marine training or more training toward Vietnam?

Swanson: You know what was interesting, I was there in the summer of '64, I was in Quantico in the summer of '64 and the summer of '67 and during that period of time the things that you heard, the stories and the anecdotes that went along with the training changed dramatically. In '64 there was mention you know, but we were still using m14's these big long, long barrel riffles from Korea, the training was how to fight Korea, and it stayed that way and that was well known criticism of the military that training was always geared to the last war. But in '67, summer of '67, it was unmistakable that all of our drill instructors all of the Marines, regular Marines, that you met had been there not once but in some cases twice the platoon commanders were rotated back, and these training assignments were kind of a rest and recuperation if you will form the combat assignments so no the training never really struck me as particularly unique to Vietnam but the attitude the philosophy and the stories, and the story telling was a huge part of military

training changed, and changed dramatically so that the point of every drill was to survive Vietnam, the point of every exercise was you better learn this or the gooks will get you in '67, but in '66 and '64 it was only very occasional very, very occasional 8 mile 10 miles forced marches that works anywhere. The one thing I will say I was on scholarship to FSU at the time playing football and I left both times, summer of '64 and '67, glad to return to two-a-days, cause the Marine Corp was absolutely the most physically demanding and rigorous experience of my life, it made college football seem like a piece of cake.

Fernandez: Can you talk about any man or officer you remember from your training that might stand out?

Swanson: From my training? Well let me tell you a story about people in general, and it was a crystallizing, kind of a crystallizing moment for me because I was beginning to change. In '64 I was really gun ho; I went back to college and I was bent on a military career, and all the way up to, I was beginning to have second thoughts, I was beginning to have second thoughts about the whole thing by the summer of '67 but I was still pretty gun ho, you know still pretty positive but I was starting to wonder politically, personally and so forth whether or not this was really worth while and I also had met and became engaged to my wife. We have been married for 40 years. My wife grew up outside the United States, so to her everything that seemed so fundamental and basic to me about Americanism always and everywhere was curious to her and so all of the platitudes that I had about duty and honor, Marine Corp, and tradition just, as a very intelligent very critical, not critical in a negative way, but critical in an intellectual way she always asked penetrating questions and in our discussions and by the point, by the summer of '67 we were talking a lot about Vietnam. And we were also talking personally about our lives and it became pretty obvious that she really had no calling whatsoever for that military wife lifestyle and it begun to raise questions which frankly made sense to me, I just never asked them, just never thought of them. So anyway I went to Quantico in summer of '67 with the whole schizophrenic attitude, I was gun ho and committed, you know cause in spite of how difficult it was it was really exciting and everyday you knew you were alive, but on that end there are always second thoughts, and the Marine Corp of course was wonderful at the psychological game of training so, now the story cause it changed my life, it was a moment that changed my life, somewhere around the 4 weeks into 6 weeks that we were there, the Marine Corp suddenly eased up. And they opened what they called the Candidates Club. Officer candidates were referred to, if we weren't called scum or maggots or other variety of things, we were called candidates that was the official term. So the Candidates Club was huge giant room of you know, storage room that had been converted to of all things a bar, and you could buy a draft beer for a quarter, nickel, and it was nothing, so you can imagine, here are a thousand guys in the prime of life and so forth the Candidate Club got real popular, some were around the second or third time I was there, you know you can imagine a room filled with five hundred guys some of them, you know have been already working on the fourth or fifth beer, someone got up on the table and started singing the Marine Corp hymn, the halls of Montezuma, and about four words into the song fifty people then one hundred people then five hundred of us at the top of our lungs screaming out from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli blah, blah, blah, it was at that moment I had this epiphany

and I realized my God, that's how people die, because you become so completely committed, to the experience, this energy, this esprit de corp, this power, the invincibility, that you know reason is gone. And so five hundred of us screaming from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli I realized, O my God, that's what makes you run, you know head long at people shooting at you, which is intellectually the dumbest thing in the world to do, but you know it happens all the time. And you know I have looked around at that point I began to muse on this, and these are some incredible young men there were no women at that point in time and very few blacks, even in '67 in OCS I think there were few blacks, no women, but this huge room full of magnificent guys most of them, I don't know, I thought about that over the years, of the five hundred that were there that day how many of them died. Cause they were all you know those that survived the training stayed with it, second lieutenant and first lieutenant and they were platoon commanders. And that of course was the way my roommate who was a platoon leader in the army was killed leading a platoon down in the jungle trail. Anyway it dawned on me that there is psychology, if you will mass hysteria that creates this warrior mystic that leads you into places that if you stopped and think, you know thought about it you would never do. I put that together with my second thoughts and realized that if I went through with this I was, I was if not given my life away, certainly given any control to someone, control that I had whether I lived or died, I was giving that control, to the Marine Corp you know and some of the most impressive young men that I met were in OCS, strong, fit, smart, all from college, honorable, honest, you know and there were a lot of not so cool honorable types, but by and large this was a really impressive group of people. Over the years to muse about it I mean, my God what a crew to turn loose on world hunger and it's tragic that it doesn't work that way.

Fernandez: What was your first impression of U.S. involvement in Vietnam?

Swanson: Well that would have been in '64 when I started hearing stories from drill instructors and wow, what a great opportunity to win medals and be brave, you know and I was completely clueless as to the politics, the history and of course everyone knew that the French in Dien Bien Phu were fools and we wouldn't make those same mistakes. So my first thoughts of Vietnam like so many inspiring service men before on the, the before side of combat was you know is — is “my god I'm about to embark on the greatest adventure of my life”, that was my first impression.

Fernandez: Did you stay in touch with friends in the service during the war?

Swanson: No — not really, the people that I knew in the POC program, I knew when I was there, it was interesting we came together at Washington National, got on the buses went out to Quantico, lived together, and then we got on the buses went back and that was it. The guys that ultimately went full time and so forth but I never maintained any contact beyond that. The friends that I had that participated in the war through other means were incidental. My roommate I knew from football and being a roommate, ROTC was just something he did, I did visit them, he and his wife, he married his childhood sweetheart, we visited John at I forgot what Army base it was right before he shipped out and we were traveling, but my friend Mike, my

music friend he was here in-between, he was a helicopter pilot. He was caught in a middle class teenage prank which involved a felony, the judge said, "son I'm going to send you to jail or your going to join the army," and at the time army looked like a better deal he joined the army later went to OCS then went to flight school, learned to fly helicopters, got real good at it, got real gun ho, when I met him again he was a captain in the Army on his way over to Vietnam, we spent the better part of the summer playing music and hanging out and doing things like that which was like another life and so I had friends, friends like him and friends that were more and similar to my experiences during that time that were going to rallies and going to marches and writing letters and beginning the whole protest thing. It's interesting because my experience of friends transcended to whether, whether you were opposed or, or gun ho. I know that wasn't a common experience or I guess it wasn't a common experience but for me it was. It was interesting, it kind of kept Vietnam in the distance. By '68, '69 for me it was a distant horror that you know, was filled with all kinds of political and social injustice so on and so forth and was huge part of a growing protest movement which having watched it, started with civil rights marches in Birmingham and salmon and ultimately spun of is my perception on it, I'm not sure how contemporary U.S. historians would view it, but watching it unfold the Vietnam protest as did the women's right movement just spun logically out of this civil rights movement which at its, consistent through it all was questioning a government that would lie and questioning policies that were hypocritical and ill founded and grounded and political misdeeds.

Fernandez: Did you, what would you say your stance against the war, would it be a strong stance where you were completely against it or just a normal stance that went with the public?

Swanson: Yea, no, no, I went full circle, I went from, from, as I told you before the first time I heard of it was intriguing opportunity to play war for real and by the time I returned I left, Quantico from having graduated and heading back to school I was pretty well convinced that I wasn't going to go through with it and then my graduate school experience convinced me, and within a year I was vehemently and completely and absolutely opposed to the war and everything that it stood for, so I went full circle.

Fernandez: Ok, if you could just state your name once again for the record and state that you are aware that we are recording this.

Swanson: I'm Helge Swanson and I'm still aware that we are recording this.

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