

My Viet Nam War: Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrator: Dennis Phelps

Interviewer: Chris Le, Bridget Devlin

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**CL** [00:00:03] Okay. This is Chris Le. Today is Friday, November 12, 2021. I will be interviewing for the first time, Mr. Dennis Phelps. This interview is taking place at the Multi-Media Resource Center at the Science Library at the UCI Campus in Irvine, California. This interview is part of my Vietnam War Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Would you state and please, spell your name?

**DP** [00:00:27] My name Dennis Phelps. Dennis Phelps.

**CL** [00:00:35] Okay. And when-

**DP** [00:00:38] Let me turn my phone off.

**CL** [00:00:39] Sure. No problem.

**DP** [00:00:41] I'll turn it down anyway.

**CL** [00:00:49] Okay. And when and where were you born?

**DP** [00:00:54] I reported Ogden, Utah.

**CL** [00:00:57] Mm hmm. In Ogden, Utah?

**DP** [00:00:58] Ogden, Utah, on either the 21st or 22nd of May 1949.

**CL** [00:01:04] Nineteen forty nine. Okay. Pretty far out from California!

**DP** [00:01:08] Eight hundred miles.

**CL** [00:01:11] Eight hundred miles.

**DP** [00:01:12] From here

**CL** [00:01:12] Right. (Chuckles) And if you don't mind me asking, What did you have for breakfast today?

**DP** [00:01:18] Wondering what?

**CL** [00:01:18] Oh, sorry, what did you have for breakfast today?

**DP** [00:01:21] Today? Cinnamon Corn Chex

**CL** [00:01:30] (Laughs) Very nice. Okay, so you were raised in Utah. What did your parents do for a living? Growing up.

**DP** [00:01:38] My father was a construction worker.

**CL** [00:01:40] Construction worker.

**DP** [00:01:41] He's a pipe fitter.

**CL** [00:01:43] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:01:43] And, the thing that stuck out in my mind most about him is in the wintertime, the ground would freeze, so there's no way they could put pipe in the ground. And we had to go on welfare. I got my— he bought my shoes at the Salvation Army for ten cents. And my mother would put them on the stove and boil them. And then, when it cooled off I'd wear them until they dried out and fit my feet. But the thing that really stuck out is when we went on welfare, he wouldn't take the welfare money for nothing.

**CL** [00:02:30] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:02:32] He either went out and worked on the trash trucks for the city where he went out and dug graves. He wouldn't take it for free. And that's the way I feel about all of it, too. I'm done.

**CL** [00:02:53] And it was just your father, so your mother would, was she a stay at-home mother or was she—?

**DP** [00:02:57] Back then, it was only one person working in the family.

**CL** [00:03:03] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:03:03] It was, it was a good life back then.

**CL** [00:03:05] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:03:07] And now it's, the danger of today with both parents working is the school is indoctrinating their children.

**CL** [00:03:16] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:03:16] And that's, that's a real worry right now.

**CL** [00:03:19] Right. And in terms of other family, did you have any other siblings or—

**DP** [00:03:26] I had an older brother 10 years older than me.

**CL** [00:03:29] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:03:29] And I have a younger brother that's 17 months younger than me.

**CL** [00:03:35] Mm-Hmm. Okay. And did they, did you all go to school? At a young age?

**DP** [00:03:44] My older brother never finished high school.

**CL** [00:03:47] Mmm.

**DP** [00:03:48] He, he quit in the 10th grade. I was the first one in the history of our family to ever finish high school. And, my younger brother, he finished. But, it was a pretty tough life for him too.

**CL** [00:04:09] OK. And, so in school, like, you mentioned that you and your younger brother, you both finished high school. What were your favorite topics growing up, or sports? Or were you interested in any activities?

**DP** [00:04:25] Well, I couldn't, they took me out of football. I couldn't play sports because when I was 13, I got Bright's disease, which is the kidneys stopped functioning. And we went into the hospital for quite a while, and then I got over that. But it wasn't enough to keep me out of the army. (Laughs)

**CL** [00:04:51] Oh, wow.

**DP** [00:04:52] But I didn't mind that, I enjoyed going to the army, I felt like I should do it because they asked me to.

**CL** [00:05:02] Right, right. So that brings me to my next topic. How did you, your interest in the army, was it through an enlistment or were you drafted?

**DP** [00:05:10] I was drafted.

**CL** [00:05:11] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:05:12] And they awarded me an MOS, a 44C 20, which is a welder, because I was a certified welder when I got drafted. ].

**CL** [00:05:20] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:05:22] And I didn't get to come home and go to work at the company I worked at when I got out, because I owned the company that I worked at and I lost the company.

**CL** [00:05:37] Oh no.

**DP** [00:05:37] I had to sell my cars and my motorcycle and everything to pay my rent in the army.

**CL** [00:05:43] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:05:45] So, it was a total start over when I got out.

**CL** [00:05:49] Right, right. So I believe by the time you finished high school, you must have been aware of the conflict in Vietnam. What was your perspective on that?

**DP** [00:06:00] You know, my father used to sit in front of the TV [Television] and worry himself sick that I was going to be sent to Vietnam.

**CL** [00:06:08] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:06:09] And I told him, "Don't worry, dad, I'm not going to go", because at the time, I own 10 percent of the defense contracting company. And when I quit, they stopped my deferment and I got drafted immediately. In any way, my father would sit and worry about that. And he died in April 19, in May, and I got drafted in June.

**CL** [00:06:42] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:06:42] So he didn't see me go.

**CL** [00:06:44] Oh.

**DP** [00:06:46] You know, it was, that was—

**BD** [00:06:50] You were drafted in June?

**DP** [00:06:51] Pardon me?

**BD** [00:06:52] You drafted in June 197—.

**DP** [00:06:54] I was 19 years old, yeah.

**BD** [00:06:57] Wait what was that, 1970?

**DP** [00:06:59] Sixty-nine.

**CL** [00:06:59] Sixty nine, yes. So this is skipping ahead a little bit, but I just want to ask a little personal question, do you think your father would have been very proud to see you off if he could, at the time?

**DP** [00:07:14] Oh, absolutely.

**CL** [00:07:17] Okay. And how do you think he would have felt about it?

**DP** [00:07:21] He would have worried.

**CL** [00:07:22] Mmm. Okay. So after enlisting, where did you do basic training?

**DP** [00:07:30] Fort Ord.

**CL** [00:07:32] And where was this?

**DP** [00:07:33] Fort Ord, California?

**CL** [00:07:34] Oh, in California.

**DP** [00:07:36] It's the only place that doesn't have downhill. Everything's uphill.

**CL** [00:07:40] Oh, so this (Laughs), it's all uphill, gotcha. So when you arrived, what were your first impressions of your basic training, like the first day you arrived? What do you remember the most on your first day?

**DP** [00:07:56] Yeah. What the hell am I doing?

**CL** [00:07:59] Oh, okay.

**DP** [00:08:00] Yeah. What am I doing here?

**CL** [00:08:02] (Chuckles).

**DP** [00:08:02] They tell you, "Put your clothes in this box, label it, and send it home". And that's the last you see of your civilian clothes.

**CL** [00:08:11] Oh.

**DP** [00:08:11] You're issued your fatigues and uniforms and everything. And that's it.

**CL** [00:08:21] Hmm.

**DP** [00:08:21] You're part of the green machine.

**CL** [00:08:24] Right. And you mentioned since you were a certified welder when you came into the army, was your training any different from basic infantry?

**DP** [00:08:37] No. Basic training is basic training for everybody.

**CL** [00:08:40] For everyone. The standard-

**DP** [00:08:41] You learn to shoot weapons. You, you learn to march, you learn to run. You get physically fit. You really get physically fit and after that, they either send you to AIT, which is advanced infantry training, or they send you to another school to teach your trade or whatever, depending on the MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] they give you.

**CL** [00:09:10] Right.

**DP** [00:09:11] They awarded me my MOS because I was a welder, so I got 44C 20 right out of basic, and I went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And I taught on the job training the shake and bakes out of Aberdeen, Maryland, because these guys would come out of the school in

Aberdeen, six months in the army, their E5's [Sergeant]; and I'm a PFC [Private First Class] teaching them how to weld, how to do it on the job.

**CL** [00:09:44] (Chuckles) That's good. So once you arrived in Kentucky, if you could, take me through an average day, what did your schedule look like, for just an average day

**DP** [00:10:00] Repairing vehicles you know, welding up broken parts on vehicles. You know, when these students come out of Aberdeen, they know how to weld on a table, but they don't know how to weld overhead, or vertical, or in a position that's really hard to get to. So you have to teach them how to do that.

**CL** [00:10:25] And was it difficult teaching them, did you find?

**DP** [00:10:29] Some.

**CL** [00:10:29] Okay.

**DP** [00:10:30] Some people, just don't have aptitude. So you know, it's like, I was leading a company and they said, "What do you got this guy over here for, he doesn't know anything. What are you paying him for?". [Phelps replies] "I guess I'll fire him and get rid of him, if you want him to sweep the floor".

**CL** [00:10:56] (Chuckles).

**DP** [00:10:56] You know somebody's got to do that.

**CL** [00:10:58] Right.

**DP** [00:10:58] You have to find what a person has the aptitude for, and put him in it. And if it's not enough, they're not happy and If it's too much they're not happy. So you have to be able to figure out, the balance for him. That's what I did. That's how I did it.

**CL** [00:11:19] And was there any other, besides welding, were there any other things that you were in charge of, or any other duties?

**DP** [00:11:31] I come out of the army with a 44C 20, 44B 20 and a 44E 20, which the B was body and fender, the E was a machinist. And if I were to get one more MOS, I would become 44 Zulu Z.

**CL** [00:11:51] Right.

**DP** [00:11:51] But you had to be an E6 to get that. And I only an E5. I was a specialist. Spec 5.

**CL** [00:11:58] That's very interesting. Okay, so you mentioned before that you were part of the 130rd Engineers and later, the 169th Engineers Battalion. What led you to those? Were you selected and how? How was that process?

**DP** [00:12:17] No, I got orders.

**CL** [00:12:22] Oh. [Chuckles].

**DP** [00:12:22] You know, I stepped off the plane in Cam Ranh Bay.

**CL** [00:12:25] Cam Ranh Bay.

**DP** [00:12:26] In August 31st, 1970. And the guy says, "Welcome to the Nam. You get to go home in the year if you make it".

**CL** [00:12:37] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:12:38] And again, I thought, "What the hell am I doing here?". Anyway, I stayed in Cam Ranh Bay for three days. When you're in transit, you get the terrible details.

**CL** [00:12:53] Right.

**DP** [00:12:54] And the bad one is burning excrement. And that was my first thing I had to do there, which is not really a nice job.

**CL** [00:13:07] Right. I'd love to hear more about it. Like all the details, how was, what made it so gruesome and so difficult?

**DP** [00:13:20] It was called burning shit. That's what it's called. So, they had latrines that were, like wooden lean to sheds and

**DP** [00:13:36] it was built up and had four holes. And a wooden flap that used a piece of inner tube for a hinge.

**CL** [00:13:44] Right.

**DP** [00:13:44] And the back would lift up and you'd slide in part of a 55 gallon drum that's cut off about 12-14 inches high. Had a couple handles burnt into it so you'd pick it up and move it, and when you get full, you just raise it and pull him out, and take him down the road and put diesel in them and burn them, you know? Yeah—.

**CL** [00:14:15] The smell must have been awful.

**DP** [00:14:17] Yeah, it is a bad detail. (Laughs).

**CL** [00:14:18] (Laughs)

**DP** [00:14:18] Most of the time we had an old papa-san that did it.

**CL** [00:14:24] Mm-Hmm. And could you elaborate as to what that is?

**DP** [00:14:29] Papa-san?

**CL** [00:14:30] Yeah.

**DP** [00:14:31] Well, the older people we call them papa-san and the older women, we call them mama-san. Papa-san, mama-san, boy-san.

**CL** [00:14:45] Ahh, okay.

**DP** [00:14:47] And just the lingo of what everybody talked, you know? And, you know, there's a few words I remember like, "Didi mao": get out of here. Like, "lai day": come here, but you don't do it like this [beckoned with hand]. You do it like that.

**CL** [00:15:08] Yeah.

**DP** [00:15:14] Yeah. I remember one time the first sergeant told a guy, I think his last name was Alvarez. He told him, "Alvarez, get out there and burn shit". [Alvarez replies] "You don't want me to burn shit". He said, "I told you, get out there and burn shit now". Well, he was a field truck driver, so he would have got his field truck and squirted down all of the [00:15:45] **traints** (??) [0.0s] made out of wood, and he squirted them down with diesel, and lit them all on fire. Burned them all over the ground.

**CL** [00:15:56] Wow.

**DP** [00:15:56] First Sergeant comes up, "What the hell is going on?". Turns around and says "I told you you didn't want me to burn shit". [Chuckles].

**CL** [00:16:09] [Chuckles].

**DP** [00:16:09] Everybody just, it was funny. Everybody cracked up because it's—

**CL** [00:16:15] Definitely sounds like something everyone would remember.

**DP** [00:16:17] Yeah, can't forget it. There were two Puerto Ricans. There were like Laurel and Hardy. Carlos E. Ortiz-Flores was one of them, and the other one, I can't remember his name, but we called them Pancho and Frito, and Frito was driving a three-quarter truck, and Pancho was in the back of it with an oxygen settling tank. So the oxygen [00:16:57] **(tank)??** [0.0s] was in the cab with Frido. And from these live trees that were burning, there was a trail of diesel flowing down the crevices in the road from the rain. And it was on fire, it was burning. Well, Frito comes driving up with a truck parked right on top of the fire. [Chuckles] Poncho's in the back, "Frito, what the hell are you doing man, fire down there since it's going to blow up and reckon I'm not going to be no more one to turn this off". And they were they were both just going on, hilariously chatting, chatter back and forth. He finally got the truck off there, though, but it was hilarious watching that. And you know, a lot of times were usually good to remember.

**CL** [00:17:53] OK, and we'll definitely get more of that because I'd love to hear more. So primarily when you left Kentucky for Vietnam in August of 1970, you mentioned—

**DP** [00:18:05] Yeah.

**CL** [00:18:07] What do you remember on the trip there? So flying over the Pacific.

**DP** [00:18:13] On the trip there?



**CL** [00:18:14] Yes, to Vietnam.

**DP** [00:18:17] I remember coming home to California and my wife was all bummed out because I was going, and I got on the Western Airlines flight to Fort Lewis, Washington.

**CL** [00:18:38] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:18:42] And we're going down a deal and my wife's crying, my younger brother is there and I told him, "Don't worry about me, I'll be okay. I'm fine. Don't worry about me". And I told my younger brother, I said, "Don't worry about me, go take care of my wife. Just make sure she's okay". And apparently somebody on the airline heard me doing all this, because I'm sitting in the back of the airplane and the stewardess comes up, she called me by name. She says "We need to have you move up front into first class". I said "Why?", and she said "Well, we need to balance out the airplane". Baloney, you know, so they moved me to first class and I got first class to Fort Lewis. And I figured the only reason they did that is that they heard for, you know, where I was going and what I was giving up. But, I'll never forget that. And then when I got on the airplane to go to the Vietnam, it was Seaboard World. Black ball basketball player man, because that thing when it landed, it would bounce. It was so full, so loaded, that it took the whole runway to get off the ground and we ended up staying in Alaska for 12 hours, 13 hours, something like that, snow in the windows just four-foot high. It was the most snow I've seen in a long time Being from Utah, I saw snow but not like that. But anyway, every time we went from Alaska to Okinawa, yeah, Okinawa, and then from Okinawa to Cam Ranh, and every time we would stop, the changes, the stewardesses would get older and older. But by time we got there, they were real old ladies. (Chuckles).

**BD** [00:21:03] (Chuckles).

**CL** [00:21:03] (Chuckles)

**DP** [00:21:07] But, you know, Seaboard World. I'll never forget that. You know, I was afraid to fly back then. So I went to the center row, right over the wing and every row, the seats tilted back, except the one that I picked. And then that one, the seats slid forward to make it tilt. I slid forward and a guy in front of me tilted back, about broke my kneecaps. So, I had to sit straight up all the way to Vietnam. Twenty-seven hours.

**CL** [00:21:49] Oh man.

**DP** [00:21:50] You know?

**CL** [00:21:50] Yeah.

**DP** [00:21:51] Yeah, but that was just a day

**CL** [00:21:54] Mm-Hmm. And so obviously, after twenty seven long hours of not being able to move, I couldn't even imagine, what do you remember upon arriving? So what were your first impressions of, you know, so you're off the plane, you've been on the plane for 20—.

**DP** [00:22:11] The smell.

**CL** [00:22:12] The smell?

**DP** [00:22:13] The stench. There was the smell of death. It was, it was horrible. It was horrible, just smelled really bad. Bad. And then that guy said, "Welcome to the 'Nam. You get to go home in a year if you make it". I thought, "Geez, what am I doing?". (Chuckles) Yeah.

**CL** [00:22:37] And how, asides from the first impression, so, your thoughts were, what am I doing here, right? It must have been extremely difficult. What did you do on your first day? Do you remember your first day, do you remember?

**DP** [00:22:54] The first day?

**CL** [00:22:57] The very first day.

**DP** [00:22:59] I remember a big green bus, olive drab bus coming to pick us up.

**CL** [00:23:06] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:23:07] And I thought, "God, I didn't know Kawasaki made busses" because of all these motorcycles, you know? Yes, Kawasaki bus, took us to the barracks and then I was in there, and this first sergeant comes in. He walks through and he looks at me, and looks at me like a piece of meat, you know, and I say, "Who is that guy?", and he says "That's your new first sergeant". So they put me on a C-130 and I flew Bien Hoa. I stayed, I stayed in Bien Hoa for two days in the transit barracks. And then I was assigned to the 103rd. And I went there, stayed there for a month. And then after that, we were told we were going out to the end of QL1, which is Highway One,.

**CL** [00:24:16] Highway One.

**DP** [00:24:17] And the first sergeant says, "When you're not going out there, if you got to take a leak or you're going to take a dump, you just hang off that running board. You don't stop for nothing. And so anyway, we got out there and when we got, there was nothing but jungle. We took out bulldozers and cleared it and push and burned and built a fire support base and an artillery moved in, nine 105's [M101 howitzer] and two eight inch guns. And then an 11th Armored Cab moved in. They had a bunch of dusters and shared tanks and A.P.C.'s [Armoured Personnel Carriers], and they were down at one end, but 105's off to the side there. But it was like, every day, we got a CH-47 coming in with supplies or maybe a Huey dropping supplies in. And. Ah, well, had a company come and drill a well for us.

**CL** [00:25:39] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:25:39] And for a week we had to watch this well, boiling water up, but we couldn't drink it because it had never been tested yet.

**CL** [00:25:55] Right.

**DP** [00:25:56] So we had to wait for the test to come back from Long Bien and it finally came back. And boy, that was sweet water. That was so good, because all we had before that was water coming into a truck and it was an awful taste. But, you know, it just developed into

a little small base and stayed there, lived in a culvert. This one bottom piece was curved, and then two more come up, and then two more, and it went across the top, and there was room enough to put three bunks in there. And now, if they put it together wrong when it rained, there was a curtain of water that came between each one. It was a lot of sewage. There's no such thing as dry.

**CL** [00:26:51] Right.

**DP** [00:26:52] It's just wet. Everything is wet.

**CL** [00:26:55] How did you react to your first monsoon season?

**DP** [00:26:58] I hated it.

**CL** [00:27:00] Do remember specifically, what about it? Did it change your operations in the camp as well?

**DP** [00:27:08] 10 to 12 inches of dust turned into 10 to 12 inches of mud. It was just, we have a big [00:27:20]youth?? truck that hauled the whole 10 yards, or 12 yards of dirt or rock, and you rode your [00:27:28]crown??. so the water wont' pool on top of them. And these trucks should really be going (makes sound) and they'd just fall over, slipped over, laying in the ditch on their side, so you got to get an M88 or something to pull them out of there.

**CL** [00:27:47] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:27:48] Yeah, but it was it was a good experience because, you know, the one thing about being in the engineer's share, if you needed something, you put it on red ball, and you'd have it three days. I mean, it came by air and it was just incredible. What you can do because, you know, the engineer's motto is that the difficult things we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer.

**CL** [00:28:22] Right.

**DP** [00:28:24] And you moved where you want it, it doesn't matter. You got used to it, but I loved being in the engineers. \.

**CL** [00:28:35] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:28:36] It was, it was great.

**CL** [00:28:38] Right.

**DP** [00:28:40] Of all of the branches and the duties, that was the one I liked the best.

**CL** [00:28:46] Mm-Hmm. And speaking of conquering the impossible, did you ever feel like you were short? How were supplies? Were you ever short of supplies? Was everything pretty manageable?

**DP** [00:29:00] Well, we had an awful lot of sea rations and, you know, and everyone experienced sea ration corned beef. Because it's like slime. It's real, terrible stuff. Yeah. And

we went through using a lot of that, eating a lot of that and different sea rations. And then if we did get a roast or something, the cook would burn it to death or it was overcooked and no good.

**CL** [00:29:40] Right.

**DP** [00:29:42] And then one day, my friend and I, Basset, Bob Basset; he was my best friend there. We went over to what's called lifer's square. That's where all of the NCOs and officers had their hooches.

**CL** [00:30:01] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:30:01] And this one square in the middle of our compound. And they were having a barbecue. So "Where did you guys get this meat?". [Impersonating an officer] "Oh here Basset, you and Dennis take this and get out of here. Go back to your hooch and eat this". So we went back to our hooch, called a dog, and took our Polaroid camera and took a picture of the dog eating the steak.

**CL** [00:30:29] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:30:30] Took it back to him and said, "This is what we think of your steak. You've been stealing our rations. We're supposed to have one cut of meat every week and we haven't had any. You guys are stealing it. You better have a barbecue every Sunday, or this is going to the IG". We had a barbecue every Sunday.

**CL** [00:30:54] (Laughs) Wow. So it seems like the prime cut must have been really good then.

**DP** [00:31:06] The what?

**CL** [00:31:07] The cut.

**DP** [00:31:09] The meat? Yeah, it was a T-Bone or New York steak you know? It was a really good piece of meat. But we weren't getting any until we did that.

**CL** [00:31:23] Right, right. So you mentioned that you've, up until this point, you've seen a lot of combat, a lot of action as well as getting by or passing the time right? Describe a day of combat exposure for you.

**DP** [00:31:48] I don't remember the dates.

**CL** [00:31:50] Or any day.

**DP** [00:31:52] I just remember (pauses) most of the time when we got hit, it was at night. And I'll never forget the day we got hit, and there were tracers flying all over the place. And their tracers were green and ours were red. And there wasn't [00:32:20]much? [0.0s] going by all over the place. One officer, Squires, comes out and he says, "What the hell's going on out here?". I told them, "I don't know, sir. Why don't you get up on a berm and see if you can figure it out?". And you know, it was obvious that we were getting hit. And then we had a listening post. It was like, a quarter of a mile away up on this side of the hill and that got hit

one night. The only person that got wounded is one of the guys fell out of the Jeep, trying to haul more ammunition up to him. That was it, it didn't get anybody. None of our people were hit and killed in firefights in our base, and we were kind of joking about everything we were going to name the base "Camp Courage" like [00:33:18] **F true.** [0.1s] And we're just about ready to name it Camp Courage when our friend Desmond was killed. So we named it Camp Desmond. (Long pause) This is hard to say. I was on a three-quarter going to go to Long Binh to the PX [Post Exchange], and Desmond came up and said "Phelps, you need to fix my dozer". And I go "What's wrong with it?". He says, "The rock guard bolts are broke". (Phelps replies) Damn Hank. You know, if you keep it tight, they don't break!". He then says, "Yeah, I know but they broke and they deadlined it and I got to have it". So I got mad, and I got off the truck. I said, "I'll fix your dozer and you go to the PX for me", and I gave him my money. And ten minutes later he was dead. Got hit by shrapnel from a command detonated mine on the way to Long Binh. And for years, I felt like it should have been me instead of him. And for fifteen years, I didn't really talk to anybody about anything. And the doctors at the hospital told me, "You know, you need to talk about it, because if you don't talk about it, it'll will never quit bothering you". So it's just, when you talk about it, it's like having a bottle of whiskey. And you take a drink and it hurts real strong. It hurts like hell to talk about it. You pour a little water back in the bottle. The next time you take a drink, it's not as strong. You pour a little more water back in the bottle, and it's like doing that to until it quits hurting. And it never quits hurting. For fifteen years. I had survivor's guilt, looking for a bridge or something to drive off of. And my friend called me and said, "There's a portable wall coming to Rose Hill". I'm getting off the track of being over there now.

**CL** [00:35:51] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:35:53] Anyway, so we planned on going there on Tuesday, on a Tuesday. And Tuesday came. I couldn't (Pauses), I couldn't go. (He quotes himself) "I know I don't want to go. I can't go. I can't go". And Wednesday I came home from work, sat down, turned on the news and then I jumped up and I said, "Come on, let's go to the wall, let's go". So we called my friend Martin, and we got him. We went up there, and this sergeant says, "There was someone else looking for that name. Do you want to talk to him?". And I said, "No, I can't talk to him". He said, "I'm sure they'd appreciate it". So he came back and said "I found those people. They'd really like to talk to you". (Phelps replied) "Well, okay, okay, I'll talk to them". It was his brother and his sister. He was from Pico Rivera and I was from Orange and we talked many, many, many times about what we were going to do when we got out. His mother said "The army told me that he got killed going to the dentist, and I just want to know if that's true". And I don't know how I did it, but I said "No that's not true. He killed going to the PX for me" (begins to get emotional). She hugged me, and said she wanted to adopt me to take his place. It's like a million pounds (makes sound similar to a "poof"). Gone, no more bridges to drive off of.

**CL** [00:38:00] Thank you for sharing. So I guess the next question I have was that you mentioned that your best friend was killed through shrapnel. What was the most dangerous part of your duties as an engineer?

**DP** [00:38:22] The most dangerous part of my duty? Guard duty (laughs).

**CL** [00:38:26] Oh, okay.

**DP** [00:38:31] Guard duty wasn't too bad, unless you got the listening post. Listening post was really, kind of a, bad deal. I got sent up there one night with two guys who were strung out on heroin, and I told the first sergeant the next morning, "At the top, you set me up with two guys that were strung out on heroin!". (He recalls the Sergeant's reply) "Well, I know, but I got to send somebody up there that's responsible". And I just wanted to beat the hell out of him, but I couldn't do that without getting into trouble.

**CL** [00:39:12] Right.

**DP** [00:39:13] But anyway, that was a long night (Laughs). And the other thing is, some of the jobs I had to do were just (pauses) they'd put in a water line with conduit instead of pipe.

**CL** [00:39:38] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:39:39] And every ten feet, there was a leak and it had to be welded. Galvanized and it's three feet underground. So they had to dig a hole every ten feet down around this pipe. And I had to weld all of these pipes, all the way around, and both sides. Galvanized is not smoke it's a fiber. They've tested my lungs, they say they're OK, but, like the walk up here [referring to the walk to UCI]. wore me out.

**CL** [00:40:17] Oh, I'm sorry to hear that!

**DP** [00:40:18] No, that's okay, but I mean, I keep doing it, you know, and it's like my socks. They give me this thing to put my socks on, you know, so I can just reach down and put them on sitting there. And I don't use it.

**CL** [00:40:34] Oh?

**DP** [00:40:34] Because if I use it, I'll never be able to put my socks on.

**CL** [00:40:38] Mm-Hmm. And I don't want to get dependent on anything. I hate taking their drugs. I fired my psychiatrist because I told him "I quit taking my pills", and he says "Why?", and I said "Because I didn't want to sit on a couch and not give a shit, whether I live or die anymore". He says "Well, I got some other pills I can give you". And I say, "Well, how many of them have you taken?". (The doctor replies) "Well, I haven't taken any". I say, "Well, you take some, tell me what they do, and then maybe I'll take some. Until then, I want a different doctor". And I don't want to deal with more,.

**CL** [00:41:23] Right.

**DP** [00:41:24] Because, I feel now the VA is only maintaining this. They're just- (sighs). We call it managing it. Everything.

**CL** [00:41:38] Right.

**DP** [00:41:38] They're not trying to cure anything.

**CL** [00:41:40] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:41:41] They just manage it. Same with, I feel the same with what they're doing with cancer. You don't want to cure it. There's more money in management. But that's my opinion.

**CL** [00:41:54] Right. So, there's a lot of dangerous components to a lot of the infrastructural jobs you did over there. You mentioned that you shared some pretty deep stories about traumatic experiences. And I just want to ask, like many other fellow veterans who suffer from the same thing, I just want to ask, what did you do to stave those feelings of insanity away?

**DP** [00:42:25] To keep your sanity there?

**CL** [00:42:27] Uh-huh. Daily activities. Tell me about a routine.

**DP** [00:42:32] Officer Squires came out and told Basset and I to pick up all the cans around the company area; all of the beer cans, and soda cans, and everything, and get rid of them. (Quotes himself) "What do you want us to do with them, sir? He said, "I don't care what you do with them, just get rid of them. (He replies) "Yes, sir".

**CL** [00:42:49] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [00:42:50] So we took a piece of conduit, welded three couplers together and screwed them onto the end of it, and then welded a plate on the other end of it. Burned a little hole.

**CL** [00:43:00] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:43:02] And we take the can and fill it up with dirt and put the oxygen acetylene torch in that hole. When we see the gas coming out the end, we'd light the torch and flash it over the hole. And then just, boom, we'd just shoot these cans way out into the jungle. And they'd go like, maybe one hundred and fifty yards or something out into the jungle. And there was a hundred and twenty something cans, and he'd (Officer Squires) come out and say, "What the hell's going on?". (Phelps replies) "Well, we're getting rid of the cans sir". (Squires replies) "I should have known, or I would have never told you and him to do that job". So we ran out of cans. We had a smoke grenade (Phelps continues with his story) "Well, we'll take this and do it". We pull the pin and put the grenade down in the thing. It's a lot smaller in diameter than a Coke can. And Basset was afraid of putting too much gas, so he just put a little bit and it just went (makes a sound). (Laughs) It went about ten feet. And when it went off, we had purple smoke covering the whole company. Well, that brought the CO out and that was at the end of our shooting cans into the jungle. But it was it was fun while it lasted. I mean you do crazy things. Baker (refers to a friend) used to smoke Cambodian Red, which is a very potent marijuana. And it comes in packages just like cigarettes and Park Lane was another one. If you went to the PX and bought a carton of Salem, Kool or Newport, or any menthol cigarette for a dollar-fifty for a carton, you could go out and trade it straight across for a carton of Park Lanes. Which is, like a carton of Marlboros only they're marijuana cigarettes. They even have a filter on them. But anyway, Baker used to smoke this Cambodian Red like it was just plain old cigarette all the time. I tried it once and I couldn't handle that (laughs). So anyway, the first sergeant, says "Baker! You can't be smoking that stuff out there". He's in charge of ordinance (referring to the first sergeant). (Baker replies) "What's wrong Todd?". And he (the sergeant) said, "No, you can't be smoking that stuff and going out there". So he says "Green, you're going out there and lay the next pattern". So Green goes out. And what the what they do, is they take a spray can and then mark a spot. And they told the tractor operator what

angle to go in and how deep to go. And then a number of, well, Green lays out the pattern and he packs with explosives and he runs det cord [detonating cord] from one to the next, to the next, to the next [marked spots]. Well, he lit it off and the whole side of the mountain came up and one big boulder hit right in the middle of the road. Half of it stayed in the road and the other half came up over the berm and hit our steel rock and knocked it clear to the ground. And first sergeant comes out and he goes "Green, I don't ever want to see you out there again. Baker, get your ass out there and start drilling patterns" (laughs). Baker would do it, and that mountain came down like gravel. He was really good. Really good at it. Yeah, I guess he had an imagination or something on how to do it. But he was really good, and that used to scare me when you'd hear of a big U coming with a horn on. They're blowing the blast in the pit and you've got to watch for flying boulders. It's not that safe at that time. (Transitions to a new story) And then, I got guard duty one night and I went to Bunker One, and my M-16 was slung. I had two bandoliers of magazines and had an M60 by the handle on top. And a M79 [M79 Grenade Launcher] by the trigger guard. And a box of M79 ammo under my arm, and two boxes of M60 ammo in this hand. I'm walking out to the bunker and all of a sudden, I felt this jerking (makes gunshot noise). Holy crap! And the 79 went off and I look over the berm, waiting for the grenade to blow up, and it doesn't. So I looked down and the muzzle was pointing three feet in front of me. This thing came out, hit the ground, bounced, hit the bumper of a 510 dump truck, bounced off of that, and landed right in the middle of three guys who were playing catch. And I yelled, "Live grenade", and everybody split when it came out. Baker made a chimney around it and put C4 [plastic explosive] on top to detonate it. And good old Green comes out and says "Well, let's not let it go too far", and he puts sandbags on the top. You don't do that (laughs). You just let it go up, putting it on top let it go "out". But anyway, that was crazy. I went back to the arms room and I told the guy, "You dumb son of a bitch, you gave me a loaded weapon". Then he says "I didn't know it was loaded", and I said "What do you mean you didn't know it was loaded? You cleaned it after guard duty last night". He said, "I didn't clean it, papa-san cleaned it". I yanked him out of the trailer and I'm stomping on the ground for letting the papa-san clean the weapon. After they pulled me out of there, I went to the C.O. and told him I'd take an Article 50 into a court martial. And he said, "No, Phelps, you don't need that. You're never going to make that mistake again". He was right, and I don't touch a weapon without first checking to see if its loaded. This guy in the movies, now he's learned that lesson the hard way too.

**CL** [00:50:07] Right, Alec Baldwin.

**DP** [00:50:07] Only his was really the hard way.

**CL** [00:50:10] Right. Were there any other projects any other things you did that stand out to you?

**DP** [00:50:21] Yeah. I hate cold showers.

**CL** [00:50:26] Mm-Hmm

**DP** [00:50:28] With a passion, and that's all we had was cold water, cold water, cold water. So I built a water heater. I took an air tank off of a tractor, a compressor, and I cut 22 holes in it, and took the conduit and put it through there and welded it up. I made a boiler, and I put a shroud on the end and I brought the shroud out and put a diesel blower on it. And the other end, I put a shroud, put another tank on top of that with one tube going through it. And this shroud would come out and the hot air would go this way. And then the exhaust would come



out the top. Well this thing heated water faster than we could use it, and you couldn't use it fast enough to make it run out of hot water. And the guys would always forget to turn it off. And I told the first sergeant I said, "Todd, let me go to the PDO and I'll get a thermostat and a new blower for this". I had a thermostat, so I said "I get a new blower for this, and the thermostat on the side will turn it on and off". He says "All you need to do is turn it off". (Phelps replies) "Okay, okay". So many times I'd look up, I see this shroud glowing red because they didn't turn it off. So I'd go out and turn it off. One night they forgot and I didn't check it, and the first sergeant comes out to the formation in the morning. He goes "Well, Phelps said it's impossible for this thing to blow up. He's right, but by God, we ain't got a bit of cold water left in the whole company". What it did, is it got hot and pushed all the water back up into the water tower. When it dried out, the water came back down, turned into steam and went up again. And it boiled down all of the crap out of the pipes and everything. It took three days to clean the tower (chuckles). But we had hot water, lots of hot water and it was good. Yeah, everybody loved that hot water (laughs).

**CL** [00:52:58] I'd imagine so.

**DP** [00:53:02] The colonel would always come and tell us to do more, do more. We need more. We need more. We need 12,000 yards. That's a yard of gravel. Dirt. Then we'd get 12,000 and he'd say, "Well, we need 14,000" and then he gets up to 16,000. Well, we had two bulldozers pushing stockpile and that's all we could get because the stockpile was too low. It wouldn't roll high enough. So I built another conveyor and put it on top and brought it up another 60 feet to make the discharge one hundred and ten feet in the air. And that allowed the bulldozers to come off the stockpile to push secondary, and we got 18 to 20 thousand yards. And the colonel could never use it all. So we had it piling up, piling up, piling up, and we got a day off every weekend. And we had one day off every week after that. Because we did it faster than they needed it.

**CL** [00:54:19] Right.

**DP** [00:54:19] But it was fun. It was fun. General Abrams came to our compound and one of the command Sergeant Majors comes up and Pancho, who's working with me, goes "Phelps, Sergeant Major is coming". And I say "So?". So he says "What are we going to do?". (Phelps replies) "Just keep working, just keep working". So they come up and I have my hood down. (The Sergeant Major speaks) "Hey, soldier why don't you take a break for a minute and talk to us. And I say "Okay". Then they say, "Why don't you raise that hood up so I can see who you are and talk to you?". And I say "Well if I do that, my eyes will dilate and I won't be able to see the weld". And he says "Oh, come on, you can take a break, you know, take that off". So I've raised my hood up and he goes, "Soldier, you didn't shave did you?". (Phelps groans) Oh man, because I hadn't shaved for a couple of days. And it turns out we haven't had any water because this was before we got our well and stuff. So we haven't had any water and there's nothing to shave with. He (the Sergeant Major) goes "Well, did you drink all your coffee?". (Phelps replies) "Yeah". (Sergeant Major replies) "You drink all of your milk?". (Phelps replies) "Yeah". (Sergeant Major replies) "Don't you think somebody didn't drink all their milk or their coffee? You could have shaved with that man". And I went "Damn, I never thought about that". And he turns around and he says "You see what being in this man's army for 30 years will do for you?" (Laughs). I used to love to play with the minds of the lifers.

**CL** [00:56:23] So you mentioned a lot of your duties there and a lot of stories, a lot of pranks. And one thing I wanted to ask was, do you remember the most difficult time when you were there?

**DP** [00:56:40] Yeah, right after my friend Desmond was killed.

**CL** [00:56:43] Oh, OK. And I remember you mentioned in your biography that you were responsible for wounding an enemy. Could you tell me about that?

**DP** [00:56:54] Oh, yeah. I was in Bunker Six that night, and I saw movement in an old abandoned bunker, maybe 75 or 80 yards from our compound. And I took binoculars and I tried to, you know, because at night, you use binoculars to collect light. To get the light to amplify a little bit. And I saw something move and I'm sure it was someone. So took a 79 and shot around out there and went into the bunker and it blew up (referring to where he shot the grenade launcher at). And we went out to check it out, all we found was blood. So there was no confirmed anything, but it hit me really hard that, you know, that person will never be able to see their kids. Their kids will wonder where their dad is. And it's really, you know, it really hit me hard that it's a final thing, it's a finite thing when you're there. And then I've pondered about that for a long time. But then when Desmond got killed, I could have killed as many as possible and never thought or blinked about it. Because I was so angry. So much hatred in my heart for that. You know, and that's the part that destroys a lot of people. It's a hatred that you learn to have. Because it doesn't matter what color anybody is, it doesn't matter how tall they are, how fat they are, or anything else. We all bleed red. We're all people and we have to defend each other. And we have to watch out for each other. It's like this Black Lives Matter thing that's going on now. It's okay for them to say "Black Lives Matter". But if you say all lives matter, that's racist. How the hell is that? It's beyond my comprehension.

**CL** [00:59:39] Right.

**DP** [00:59:40] You know, I want to make a T-shirt that says "UBLM". Unborn Lives Matter. They care more about this criminal that died eleven days after it happened, from something other than choking I'm sure. They care more about him than they do the little kids that are killing. They're killing all kinds of unborn, defenseless people. And it's just not right.

**CL** [01:00:16] Right.

**DP** [01:00:23] Well, what can you do about it?

**CL** [01:00:25] It's a difficult question, yeah.

**DP** [01:00:27] Yeah, it's something that you can't (trails off). It's the hardest part for me to accept is that there's nothing I can do. And so it's why this helicopter that we take around, it's an opportunity to let people know what it was really like. We have videos showing what it was like and there's a there's a movie I would suggest that you get it and watch it.

**CL** [01:00:57] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [01:00:57] It's "Dear America: Letters home from Vietnam". And it's real footage. It's not actors, but it's real footage.

**CL** [01:01:14] Right.

**DP** [01:01:15] And some of it's hard to watch, but it's real. Anyway, I saw that last week in Memphis. Phew, really hit hard.

**CL** [01:01:32] Right. I'd imagine so. So that actually leads to my next question. And I just want to know a little bit about you coming home from the war as well. So how did you feel upon returning home? How was the reception? How did it feel to be home?

**DP** [01:01:51] You know, we had a guy in our unit. We called "Grandpa" because he was on his fourth tour.

**CL** [01:01:59] Oh wow.

**DP** [01:02:01] And we'd all sit there and talk and say, "Oh man, I cannot wait to get back to the world. I'm going to get back to the world and do this". And he says. "Man, you ain't gonna like it". (Phelps replies) "What do you mean, man? I want to go back and I'm going to do this and this and this". (Grandpa replies) "Nope, you're not gonna like it". And he was right. He was right. Too many times I went into the American Legion; they ran me out. They ran me out of there because I was a Vietnam veteran. (Phelps quotes the American Legion) "Vietnam was not a war. Vietnam was a police action. Get out of here". That was their attitude. So for years, I would have nothing to do with the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) or the American Legion or anything else. In fact, I never got involved with the Vietnam veterans until maybe five years ago or six years ago.

**CL** [01:03:06] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [01:03:06] A friend of mine that I met through car clubs and stuff talked me into it. And then he got killed by a drunk driver. And when he got killed, I became president because I was treasurer before that. And if I didn't do it, nobody would.

**CL** [01:03:33] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [01:03:33] So now I'm president of a bunch of couch potatoes. Some of them have pretty deep roots too; (chuckles) can't get them out to do anything.

**CL** [01:03:48] Right. And in terms of the reception coming home, can describe your most vivid experience or how the initial treatment from friends, families or any citizens were like?

**DP** [01:04:02] The only the only people that really accepted me home was my family. And to the rest of the people, I was just a baby killer. And you know, you couldn't go out. I had a few friends that I'd go out and party with, and there was a place we used to go to called the Cask 'N Cleaver. And there was two guys up there called Forehand Band and Rex and Wayne. They played a lot of Cat Stevens music and stuff. But if anybody in the restaurant found out that we were, that I was a Vietnam veteran, they'd start heckling me. So then I quit going there. I quit going anywhere for a long time for 15 years. I didn't go around and let anybody know that I was even there. Because I didn't want to be heckled anymore, you know? So after a while, I just got to the point where, "Yeah, I'm a Vietnam veteran. I've got a lot of things in my life that I'm not proud of but being a Vietnam veteran is not one of them" (gets emotional).

**CL** [01:05:25] And you should be very proud. So another thing is in the postwar period, how did you approach your trauma and your experiences in Vietnam? How have you, even now, how have you processed them? If you could tell me about that?

**DP** [01:05:48] (Long Pause). I try not to think about it too much, you know. I live pretty close to Disneyland. Not real close, but I live real close to the Angel Stadium.

**CL** [01:06:05] Oh, by Fullerton.

**DP** [01:06:06] And with fireworks go off there, I have to go outside and look at them because it's too much like artillery going off.

**CL** [01:06:15] Right.

**DP** [01:06:16] And Disneyland, when they when they go off and it's real quiet and I can hear them; I go back and I'm right back in Vietnam again. Laying in my bunk and and listening to the artillery and somewhere that they're barraging some area. And it takes me right back there again. Now most of my friends are veterans. Because basically, I don't really care for the snowflakes. You know, I met a guy the day before yesterday who were watching these big moving pans who were moving sand from one side of the pier at Seal Beach to the other side of the pier, building a huge berm so that the waves won't hit the houses. And he says, "Man, these things here, I bet these guys make a lot of money, right?", (Phelps replies) "Yeah, probably 40 to 50 dollars an hour. They make more if the union, didn't take so much of it". And he says "Yeah, who's going to be paying for that?". I said "Me and you". And he said, "What do you mean?" and I said, "Well, this is a state beach. We're going to pay for it". And it got on to politics. And he said something about Trump. (Phelps replies to this man) "I guess, you know, Trump, Trump did so many things for this country that were good. He had a mouth that he couldn't keep shut. People didn't like his attitude, didn't like his demeanor or whatever. But his policies were the best this country ever had for a long time". (The man replies) "I hate Trump, I hate him". And I said, "You know, you probably don't even know what hate is". And he said, "Well, I'm a Marine". I said, "You're a marine?". And he says "Yeah". And I said, "I don't believe you. You're a snowflake". And he said, "What do you mean?". And I said, "You're too fat to be a Marine. You might be three of them, but they would never have you in a Marine Corps. You're too far out of shape. So don't tell me that crap". And he, most Democrats, they cannot argue with you. They'll either start yelling or walk away because they don't have an argument. They don't have anything to stand on. They have no goals, no nothing. They just want to follow somebody. You know, if you want to be a sheep, that's fine. But not me, not me. If I see something that needs changing or needs help, I'll do whatever I can to help or do whatever I can to change it for the better.

**CL** [01:09:42] Right.

**DP** [01:09:42] And I'm worried about the people are going in the military now. They're not warriors. When you go to the military, you need to be ready to be mean. You're going to be mean. You have to, or you won't survive.

**CL** [01:10:05] Right. That's actually very relevant to my next question, which is have your views changed regarding the war or the treatment of veterans post-Vietnam even now? And what are your thoughts on that?

**DP** [01:10:20] Now they're doing a lot to help veterans. Now when I go someplace, if I go to Little Saigon and I walk through the streets down there, those people come up and shake my hand and they say, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you". And when I walk around, say you go into a Home Depot or some store. (Impersonates a person) "Thanks for your service". (Phelps replies) "Thank you. I'd do it again, if I could". And when you tell them that, they go "God, really? Would you do it again?" And I go "Hell yes, I would. Because I'm not ashamed of anything I did" (Gets emotional). So anyway, the people now are saying, "Welcome home". Why the hell didn't you say that 40 years ago, 50 years ago? But now they're doing it, they're saying it out of guilt. And that's okay. You know, it took them that long to do it, it's on them, not me.

**CL** [01:11:52] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [01:11:56] But I wear a hat all the time that says "I'm a Vietnam Veteran" because I'm proud of that. And on the door of our helicopter, our helicopter's called "Lifesaver". And right under the name of Lifesaver, it says "Dedicated to helping veterans come home". Because now, the veterans that are coming home now are being treated like crap. And it's not right. It's not right.

**CL** [01:12:31] Right.

**DP** [01:12:32] This guy that's in the office, you know, he's president but he's no Commander-in-Chief. He caused thirteen service people to be killed. He left Americans there. He left them there. (Quotes President Biden) "We had the largest air evacuation in the history of the world". Yeah, but who was it that you evacuated? You don't know if they're a terrorist. You don't know what they are. You don't know if they got tuberculosis or what. They don't vet anybody. They're flying them off into our country at night into different cities. So nobody will be out there to do anything about it. And our country is in real trouble right now. And I think the only people that really have the courage to do anything to save it is the veterans. Because there's too many snowflakes who say, "Well, I don't want to be bad". And you know, when I came home from Vietnam, I never wanted to shoot another weapon again in my life. Ever. I'd had enough. Before I went there, I used to hunt everything that moved. I didn't want to touch another weapon. When Obama got elected, I bought nine of them because I didn't trust him. I still don't trust him, but I won't hurt him. But what they're doing is hurting all of us really bad, but it won't show up. It's like a mosquito. Sticks it in, then puts a little bit of anesthesia, so you don't feel it.

**CL** [01:14:42] Right.

**DP** [01:14:42] You only feel mosquito when it pulls out.

**CL** [01:14:45] Pulls out.

**DP** [01:14:46] Yeah. So that's what they're doing now. They're very sad.

**CL** [01:14:54] And I actually have a question about that as well. Just thinking and listening to your perspective on politicians and how veterans are treated. Did you find that your military experience influenced your thinking and about war politics in general? And how do you think politicians approach veterans and wars in general in their methodologies?

**DP** [01:15:20] Well, the politicians. When Trump wanted to bring in the National Guard to help people straighten their cities out, the politicians in Washington called them "stormtroopers". Called them Nazis, all kinds of stuff. Now that they're using the National Guard to do what, their called "freedom fighters". And it's absolutely ridiculous, the way that the country, the politicians, use the military to play games. They gave them people because there's not one military man and there's Milly. He's not a military man, he's a snowflake. I don't even want to say what I think of him because he's more interested in getting transgenders and people that don't know what they are in the military than somebody that wants to defend the country. You know, because it's defending this piece of real estate here (taps table) because I always said, "I don't ever want to go back to that again". And unless somebody tries to take this piece of real estate, I'll be first in line. And I feel right now that these politicians are trying to destroy this country, and it's got me worried, got me really worried. And I don't mind saying, "Okay buddy, but if I got to go to jail, I'll be like, Paul, I'll just scream until you let me go".

**CL** [01:17:17] Mm-Hmm. And you feel like your experience in Vietnam has sort of given you a broader perspective on this or how do you feel-?

**DP** [01:17:26] My experience in Vietnam has made me tougher than hell. It made me realize how rugged the human body is and how vulnerable the human body is.

**CL** [01:17:42] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [01:17:43] Because it doesn't take much. It's amazing how much the human body can withstand. But it's also amazing how little it takes to make it quit. To stop and cease to function. And all it takes. Maybe four minutes, five minutes, and you're done. The whole secret to living is to keep breathing.

**CL** [01:18:20] Right.

**DP** [01:18:20] Just keep breathing. You don't breathe, you're going to go black and you're going to check out.

**CL** [01:18:27] Right.

**DP** [01:18:28] But it's something that because of where I've been. I know what can happen, and it scares the hell out of me. Not for me. You don't scare me for me. It scares me for you, and you and my son and my daughters. Makes me worry really, really a lot about them because family's everything. Without family, you have no life.

**CL** [01:19:08] Right.

[01:19:09] Because your family is what brought you into this life. It's really sad. I see some of these people talking and some of them are wising up, they're saying, "Hey, we got to stop this one person parenting". We have to get the men back in the game instead of being a bunch of lazy coward people that just go out and do whatever they can for themselves. To be bastards. But we do.

**CL** [01:19:47] Right. Very good. Well, this is more of a personal question for me as well. So let me ask you this, Mr. Phelps, before we wrap up this interview.

**DP** [01:20:00] Yeah.

**CL** [01:20:00] The Vietnam War is something that has been so defining in the lives of so many Americans who were involved over Vietnam, and it means so much to them in so many ways, positive and negative, as we've seen today. What did your experience in Vietnam mean to you? And I know that's a huge question, but you mentioned a lot of points. Was there anything else you'd like to add to that?

**DP** [01:20:28] I have a shirt that says "We went there strangers and we came home as brothers". You have three kinds of people in your life. You have acquaintances, you have friends, and you have buddies. Acquaintances are somebody that you know won't do anything for you. A friend is somebody that, you know, that will do something for you as long as it's convenient for them to do it. A buddy, that's somebody that will lay down their life for you. You can count acquaintances if you don't have enough fingers and toes to count down. You might count that many on your fingers and toes, but you only need one hand to count your buddies. Less than a hand, and they're the ones you never forget. And I had a lot of friends that I forgot all about. My buddies, I think about every day (gets emotional).

**CL** [01:21:58] And it's just something to end on a lighter note as well. So your helicopter used to bring home veterans from Afghanistan as well. When do you think your next trip will be? Is there a planned a planned trip?

**DP** [01:22:14] This Sunday.

**CL** [01:22:16] This Sunday? Wow.

**DP** [01:22:17] Yeah. We're out out all the time.

**CL** [01:22:19] (Laughs).

**DP** [01:22:21] It doesn't do any good sitting there doing nothing.

**CL** [01:22:24] Right.

**DP** [01:22:24] So now we've got TV's working in it so we can play videos and stuff. Yesterday, it was in Redlands.

**CL** [01:22:40] Mm-Hmm.

**DP** [01:22:41] In a parade. And then after that, it went Tustin to another event there. And the day before that it was in Seal Beach. And then Sunday, it's going to go to, I don't remember where, but I'll find out. It's going to go to one event early in the morning and then in the afternoon, it'll go back to Patriots and Paws for a barbecue that we have every second Sunday of the month. All veterans. It's only veterans, no wives, no family here or anything, just the veterans. They go there and talk. Talk about the things that happened to you, talk about the things that you're feeling, this and that. And like the first time, the VFW, no, the DAV [Disabled Veterans of America], they cooked the barbecue. The last time, the VFW, they cooked. So this time, Vietnam Veterans of America, we're cooking. So I get to cook hamburgers and hot dogs Sunday. But the thing is, we get to sit down and talk to each other

and do what the Marines call "scuttlebutt". Just talking about what's going on and what what you did. Because veterans can talk to another veteran pretty rough and you don't mind because you know.

**CL** [01:24:22] Right.

**DP** [01:24:23] But if somebody that's never been through it goes through the conversation, they wouldn't understand a lot of it.

**CL** [01:24:34] Right.

**DP** [01:24:36] So we do that every second Sunday of the month and then every first Sunday, we go to the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster. There's a prayer vigil there for all of the service people that died. It's getting more and more, and more. We got a half page of the front page of The Sun newspaper.

**CL** [01:25:11] That's great.

**DP** [01:25:11] It won't be long and our helicopter's going to be on the TV and we really had to start good, because, you know, we were worried about the Vietnam Veterans of America changing the name to the Veteran Voices of America. Vietnam Veterans of America is an elite group. And what makes them elite, is that you can't be in it unless you're a Vietnam veteran. Not just anybody can be in it.

**CL** [01:25:53] Right.

**DP** [01:25:53] You know, the DAV, any veteran can be in that. Any veteran of a foreign war can be in that, but you've got to be a Vietnam veteran to be in Vietnam Veterans of America. And the thing that's- Shit, I'm having a senior moment here.

**CL** [01:26:20] That's okay, take your time.

**DP** [01:26:20] Can't remember what I was going to say now, (chuckles, then remembers) but the thing about the Vietnam veterans, it's the only organization that's been sanctioned by Congress. And Congress, we held their feet to the fire. And everybody started getting their benefits after that. Because all it took was for them to treat us like shit. When we came home, we fought back, we pushed back and we got benefits for everybody. The forgotten war Korea, those guys, man, they went to hell. But they weren't given any benefits until we pushed and got them for them. That's why I saw I'm proud to be part of the organization. I'll give you a card (gives a card).

**CL** [01:27:44] Thank you.

**DP** [01:27:45] That's what it's all about.

**BD** [01:27:47] Thank you.

**DP** [01:27:55] Right under that sign (refers to the card) is "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another". That's the most important part of the legacy, the legacy that we're leaving.



**CL** [01:28:09] Right.

**DP** [01:28:13] The P.O.W. flag (refers to the card), the Vietnam veterans are the ones that brought that out. The last of the warriors. We didn't have the weapons that they have today.

**CL** [01:28:30] Right. So is there anything I haven't asked you that you feel like is important to add at this time?

**DP** [01:28:46] You've got a sleeping bag? (Laughs).

**CL** [01:28:48] All right (Laughs).

**DP** [01:28:52] Well, you know, it's something that's hard to recall because a lot of it I've put back into file cabinets that don't open too easy.

**CL** [01:29:07] Right.

**DP** [01:29:09] I just- (trails off). I feel real proud that I did what I did, not to gain anything, but to help somebody get away from their suppressor. That's it.

**CL** [01:29:44] Well, thank you. Thank you for sharing. And I just want to say, thank you very much for allowing me to interview you. And speaking for myself and my partner, I think it was an honor and a privilege to listen to your story.

**DP** [01:30:02] Thank you.