

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Theodor "Ted" Schirmer

COLLECTION: 4700.0981

IDENTIFICATION: Vietnam veteran

INTERVIEWER: Robert Talley

SERIES: Americans in Vietnam

INTERVIEW DATE: 11/19/74

FOCUS DATES: July 9, 1966-April 5, 1970; Feb 3, 1967-Sept 10, 1968

ABSTRACT:

Tape 1430, Side A

Birthplace, parent's divorce; mother's remarriage to a musician, Ted moved around constantly as child; financial ups and downs in childhood; changed schools frequently; lived in Las Vegas, Nevada for six years; moved to Baton Rouge; sports and part time job in Baton Rouge; ran away, returned to Las Vegas; belonged to gangs in Vegas; job at Denny's restaurant in Vegas re-enrolled in high school; importance of education; influence of his step family; worries about his grades; returned to his Baton Rouge, finished high school; integration of Istrouma High School; friends with Rosetta, the only black student in his high school, and trouble this caused him; students' attitudes toward Rosetta; racial incident in St. Louis; brother who joined Navy; John Wayne movies, culture of war; course work at Istrouma High School; interest in Vietnam war; planned to attend LSU after graduation on track scholarship; joined Navy; comparison of boot camps for different branches of service; psychological manipulation, humiliation, during boot camp; useless training in Navy boot camp; humiliating remedial boot camp called "4050"; suicide attempts of guys in 4050; escape attempt from boot camp; Filipinos in the Navy; other abuses in 4050; laundry and shoe shining scam during boot camp; boot camp hierarchy; negotiating what position he'd have on ship; worked on operations on Mekong riverways; petty officers were usually misfits; volunteering for unpopular assignment; father's WWII service; training in various places.

Tape 1430, Side B

Sadistic POW camp simulation during training; reality of POW situation; experiences of an American POW; arrival in Vietnam on rattletrap airplane; seeing American bodies unloaded from plane; plane that was shot up, pilot injured; harassment attacks; people he knew who were killed in Vietnam; ratio of worry to likelihood of dying; US soldiers who went crazy, tied up everyone in camp; spent eight months in Vung Tau building a camp; Schirmer learned Vietnamese, transferred down to Cat Lo (?); watching B-52 strikes; became interpreter, by Tet of 1968 couldn't trust ARVNs; learned language by mingling with people, participating in their culture; American opinions on Vietnamese; saw American convoy run over a Vietnamese child;

Schirmer alienated from other US soldiers because of his interest in the Vietnamese people; married a Vietnamese woman in a Buddhist ceremony, had a child, rented a village from an ex-Viet Minh whose son was VC; came to understand the VC as revolutionaries; Ho Chi Minh as local hero; realized he was fighting an imperialistic war; corporate interests involved in war; NVA responding to US aggression; Schirmer sent home early because he was "going Asiatic"; low opinion of commanding officers; dangerous power of commanding officers; altercation with commanding officer; weaponry, Schirmer's responsibility cleaning weapons; volunteered for chopper missions; battles between VC and Australians; enjoyed flying missions; never killed anyone, as far as he can tell for sure; morbid dreams of going home dead as a hero; suspected John Wayne movies had influenced him; lots of people over there had similar fantasies of heroism; later in the war, more people drafted who didn't want to be there; war as traditional male rite of passage; Vietnam veterans who feel guilty now; change in attitude of American public; when his mother died, military flew him home on emergency leave, he took "coffin flight," plane full of dead bodies; growing anti-war sentiment by 1968; racial trouble in Vietnam when Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated; Vietnamese people thrilled by his command of language; Schirmer lived in VC neighborhood, unafraid; adopted Vietnamese food, and clothing; almost got shot by Americans one night because of his black pajamas; Vietnamese attitudes toward Americans; US caused war to escalate; Schirmer's wife Hue in Vietnam.

Tape 1431, Side A

Audio quality is very bad

First personal contacts with Vietnamese civilians were with Mamasans; friend who got Vietnamese woman pregnant; commanding officer punishing friend for impregnating woman; Schirmer's troubles with superior officers; amazing power of his communist-hating commanding officer; ; communists killed whole families; met Hue during Tet of 1968, was his wife there; definition of "wife"; VC confiscated all his stuff; enjoyed living in VC area because not many US military authorities around there; Schirmer accepted by people there, only worried during early morning hours.

Tape 1431, Side B

Tape is blank

Tape 1432, Side A

Marriage arrangement helped protect his property; Vietnamese police could confiscate possessions of Americans; offered to marry her legally when he found out she was pregnant, but she didn't want to leave her family; later she changed her mind but too difficult; problems with Vietnamese postal system; wife Hue sympathetic toward the VC, because she could relate to them as patriots; Schirmer witnessed so-called free election in Vietnam, saw how it was controlled; dictators in Vietnam; demographics of people who fled Vietnam when Ho Chi Minh took power; majority of Vietnamese would rather end war and become one country under North Vietnam; communists will slaughter people who caused war, kept it going; "black market" is misleading term; black market trade in stereos, cigarettes, liquor; R&R trip to Saigon and Bangkok; stayed in hotel in Saigon where American deserters lived; scam involving taxi cabs and stolen ration cards; scams in Bangkok; US military bases cause black market activity; bribing police with packs of Salem cigarettes; corruption among military police; Oriental people are looser, more tolerant; in Christianity, we can't be what we really are without sin and shame;

Asians understand life and human nature better; whole markets of American products in Saigon; black market availability of hard to get items; excitement of being only 19 years old and having unlimited access to liquor and prostitutes; anti-prostitute propaganda; realization that the government lies to public; prices for different grades of prostitutes; little boys touting their sisters and mothers; prevalence of prostitution; massage parlor that specialized in oral sex; Schirmer used to get cheaper rates because he was so well known there; barber shop at massage parlor; techniques of barbers; had to buy bar girls "Saigon tea"; costs of bar girls, overnights; bar girls were better educated, spoke good English, made lots of money; bar girls bought and sold bars, lost money and bars gambling; GIs who were too uptight to visit prostitutes; gambling, playing cards, gambling at gin rummy and tic tac toe; French solitaire; Chinese games, dice; prevalence of drugs; marijuana and opium both laced with heroin; Vietnamese replaced tobacco in cigarettes with marijuana, resealed cartons; smuggling marijuana; smoking opium with his landlord; hemp and George Washington; increased number of draftees changed attitudes, drug use; marijuana didn't affect Schirmer when he tried it in Vietnam; harmlessness of marijuana and opium; hearing about anti-war sentiment in US, riots, assassinations; military press, the Stars and Stripes, reported everything as communist-motivated; when he returned to US, had anti-peacenik sentiment; finding out that the government was full of bullshit and lies; US shouldn't have been in Vietnam; escalating; US has to get in trouble since it has such a huge military; oil in South China Sea; LBJ's aims; Gulf of Tonkin affair.

Tape 1432, Side B

Gulf of Tonkin affair; Vietnam war was the fault of the American people; Schirmer wants to organize people not to stand for this sort of thing; corporations and military.

TAPES: 3 (T1430, T1431, T1432)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 20 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 7 pages

RESTRICTIONS: None