

James W. Shurtleff

Vietnam

This interview took place in 2008. The questions were asked by Adam Decker and Steve Decker.

Q: Could you state and spell your full name for us please?

A: James Ward Shurtleff J-A-M-E-S W-A-R-D S-H-U-R-T-L-E-F-F

Q: Thanks. Where do you currently live?

A: Parowan, Utah

Q: Is this the same place you live when you were drafted or enlisted?

A: No I enlisted in Santa Barbara, California. That's where my family was living when I graduated from high school.

Q: What branch of the service did you serve in?

A: I enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Q: Were you full time or a Guard or reserve unit?

A: No I was active duty.

Q: They don't have a reserve marines do they?

A: Yes

Q: Ok.

A: In fact it was a unit from the reserves here in Utah that they call them saints and sinners it's the one from Salt Lake and Las Vegas part of the unit. Ant it was a Marine Corps reserve unit from Ohio that lost those twelve guys in the IED attack back what was it two years ago?

Q: Where was your headquarters?

A: Well in the Marine Corps, I was in different units in the course of my career so it depended on where...where we were at...what...I had different jobs during the time I was in the service.

Q: Where were some of the places you were stationed?

A: My first duty station after I finished my initial training was with the Commander Cruiser Destroyer Flotilla Number Nine out of San Diego. I was a Marine attached to a Navy staff down there and that's the Unit I went to Vietnam with.

Q: What years did you serve during?

A: 1971 and then I was finally medically retired in 1981

Q: What was your highest rank?

A: I was a Staff Sergeant E6

Q: How high is that?

A: Well there are nine enlisted ranks so I was what they called a Staff Nine Commissioned Officer.

Q: Were you decorated for your service?

A: Just some service awards and longevity awards and a few campaign ribbons is

Q: Who gave you the ribbons and awards?

A: Well the Unit you are attached with, a couple of them, well three of the awards were what they called unit citations and so they are given to the Unit as a whole. One was for

the American Marine Security Guard Detachment at the American Embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus and one for the detachment in Bangkok and one was for the USS providence ship that I was on.

Q: Did you serving in combat or non-combat?

A: I had some combat, not in a bush kind of thing there were some...for example, I went to, I was assigned from the American Embassy in Bangkok to the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia during the final evacuation of the Embassy in April of seventy-five and received some fire there and of course when I was in Vietnam on board the ship I was on and we received fire from North Vietnam. So we were shot at but nothing like running through the bush you know I was

Q: Were there, did you meet anyone that became like a prominent historical figure?

A: Well he was already fairly famous when I worked for him. One of the assignments I had while I was in Marine Corps was as I said with the American Maine Guard Detachment of the American Embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus and in the early seventies I was transferred from there on temporary duty to the Embassy in Cairo, Egypt and was assigned to the detachment with the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger when he was doing his shuttle diplomacy trying to work out a deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians. So I mean he was already famous and you know I guarded his luggage is basically as close as I got to anybody famous but we saw a lot of famous people.

Q: when you remember your military service what are some of the exhilarating or humorous experiences?

A: Oh you know I was in the Marine Corps for nine years. It was, there was lots of funny things, some not so funny. It was just a tremendous experience for me. I look back on it with mostly good memories.

Q: Would you recommend it?

A: Absolutely, maybe not the Marine Corps but I think service of some kind is important for young people. I think we all owe an obligation and a certain amount of gratitude so yeah I would recommend it. [Announcement over loud-speaker]

Q: If you were reentering, you enlisted, you weren't drafted. If you were enlisting today, what would you enlist in?

A: Oh absolutely Marine Corps

Q: Marine Corps?

A: Yeah

Q: If your kids were enlisting today, what would you have them enlist in?

A: Anything they wanted. Each of the services provides a different atmosphere, a different ambiance or what ever but anything they wanted to do. I think they are all of value and it is like anything else, you basically get out of it what you put into it. So I would personally recommend it.

Q: Were there particular moments of religious experience during your service?

A: Depends on what you call religious experience. There's a few times I thought I saw God but that turned out not to be the case. But one of the ones, it's typical of many peoples experience in the Marine Corps...boot camp tended to be a religious experience. You really didn't know whether there was such thing as a God because you knew you were in Hell and these guys that were there were going to eat you up and spit you out. But you know I think religious might be too...spiritual is probably a better word for it. I mean there were times when you know you come to the realization of how fragile life is,

how important certain things are and how unimportant other things that you might have thought were important before. You know there's a, there's a certain amount of growth and maturity that comes through the course of your service. So yeah, absolutely there were some spiritual moments I guess you would say.

Q: How was your family life while you were serving?

A: I was single the whole time I was in the Marine Corps. I did get engaged just prior to getting hurt and having to retire from the Marine Corps, but that didn't work out. And so I was single the whole time I was in the Service. Of course I had my family, my parents, my brother, and my sister always there to support me. My older brother was a career pilot in the Air Force and so we had a lot in common.

Q: Did you serve at the same time?

A: Yes. He graduated from the Air Force Academy in seventy-three and I enlisted in the Marine Corps in seventy-one. So for the time between seventy-three and eighty when I got hurt, we were serving at the same time.

Q: How did you get hurt?

A: I went through the windshield of a corvette. I got in a car wreck and went through the windshield of the corvette and broke my neck. And so they, because it is residual damage they medically retired me.

Q: What were some of your experiences of joy during your service?

A: Oh, there were lots I mean, there were and especially looking back on it after twenty-eight years it all seems a lot...you tend to forget the bad parts...at least the edge of the bad parts. I had lots of good times in the Marine Corps. It was...it was...just a great experience for me.

Q: Any examples?

A: Oh...there were times, for example, I was one of the, I got the opportunity to go to Army Ranger School and make it through Army Ranger Training which is some of the best training in the Services. And that was a real boost just knowing that I can do that, just lots of great experiences. I got to jump out of helicopters and C130's with the time Marines when I was stationed in Thailand. You know, just lots of little things that were...got to see a lot of neat places, a lot of experiences in different cultures. So there were just lots of things that I really enjoyed about the Service...about the Marine Corps.

Q: Were there any things that...like any sad experiences?

A: Awe...the saddest personally, and like I said I was sent temporary duty to the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia during the evacuation and to see us leave Cambodia basically with our tails between our legs and seeing the Cambodian people and then looking back on what happened in the years following the American pull out and Pol Pot and the Cambodian Killing Kills and realizing that lots of those people were butchered and then having the experience of going to some of the refugee camps along the Thai border following the Fall of Vietnam and Cambodia and seeing the desperation of these people willing give up everything for a chance at freedom. And those were some of the saddest points that I experienced.

Q: Given the climate at the time, was there another option other than pull out?

A: Yes, but as typical of American public...the American public we tend not to like things that are hard and long-term. You know we want quick fixes and easy outs and we want everything nice and tidy. And the world's not like that. You need to...I think we tend to be a little bit short sided. We're really good at turning our backs on things that

need to, that are more difficult than other things. You know I often wonder if the Second World War would have gone on longer than it had, what the public's reaction to. You know, you stop and think about it the Second World War lasted less time than we've been in Iraq. You know, I just think granted that the times were different, but I really think that it was a mistake, but whether we could have done anything given the climate.

Q: The pull out was a mistake or the going in was a mistake?

A: Well, you could argue that.

Q: Both?

A: Both. The way that they went in, there's several recent works talking about that very thing. You know was in fact the War in Vietnam necessary or was it not...it the wrong war at the wrong time, as one author put it which could be argued. But the fact remains we were there and there were people who trusted us and depended on us and we turned our backs on them and left them. I think that can't be argued. Whether we should have been there or not that obviously can be argued, but once a commitment is made it should have been honored and fulfilled I think. And of course that's easy when we look back now. That's kind of where we are at.

Q: How were your feelings of support from the country?

A: Ahh...it's...it's very different now. During my era you went away by yourself and you came back by yourself. Very different than for example the 222nd the way they left and the way they came back. One of the major problems that or one of the real problems that was the result of Vietnam was the idea that there was no unit cohesion. You went over as an individual; you came back after your thirteen months. There wasn't a chance to build the, you know, the unit cohesion and the camaraderie that is necessary. And so you know and the whole Vietnam Era with the protests at home, for example, we were told not to wear our uniforms in public, not to bring any attention to the fact that you were in the service which is a little difficult if you're running around with buzzed hair. You know but, so there it was it was not the public support. We didn't feel the public support that perhaps other generations felt. At large, of course there were pockets that truly supported us. My family always supported us and my group of friends supported us but by large it was not the public support that perhaps we see today.

Q: So in South East Asia is it just all jungle where you were serving?

A: Well yeah I mean it's it's it's jungle but of course like I said when I was in Vietnam I was aboard ships and we were off the coast and did that and then when I was stationed at the Embassy's you know large urban areas as far as the topography and climate and vegetation it's South East Asia jungle basically.

Q: Cyprus would have been?

A: Barren, Mediterranean you know it's what thirty miles off the coast of Lebanon, eastern Mediterranean climate, very dry, about as different from South East Asia as you can get so it was an interesting contrast between the places.

Q: Do you regret anything about your service?

A: The only thing I regret is not wearing my seatbelt the day I went through the windshield. If that...if I would have had my seat belt on things might have been different, but then again you know, I wouldn't have had what I have now. So it's all good.

Q: What do you think would be the single most positive experience of your service?

A: Without getting too touchy feely, I really think the idea of being part of something larger and more important than you as an individual. You know I really think that that's

important for people to understand that we're really in this all together. You know individualism is fine but there's a certain point where we better hang together or we are going to hang separately. And so I think that's what the Marine Corps reinforced in me is that it's much better for all of us if we can discipline ourselves to work together and think of the whole more as more important than perhaps we as individuals.

Q: How has your service colored your political or social views?

A: Oh, there's the old saying that "once a Marine always a Marine". And so you tend to, you tend to view things that happened within the context of your experience. And just like we were talking before, my experience following the fall of Vietnam and Cambodia, it absolutely colors what I fear might happen in Iraq. You know there are some really bad guys out there that have no hesitation to take it out on those who supported the United States or worked for the United States. And so I have that always in the back of my mind when people talk about the needs to withdraw. I think at some point they can handle it without our help and well in good, you know. I heard something the other day that's sort of interesting; I think it was John McCain was talking about you know we've had American troops in Korea since 1950; we've had American troops in Germany since 1945, they're still there. So how long will it be that American troops might need to stay in Iraq? You know it's nothing new for American troops to be stationed places for you know half a century or more. And so to think that we can get it all straightened out in a couple of months and then come home is very naive as far as I am concerned. And so yes, my political views, my social views absolutely are colored and shaped by my experience in the Marine Corps. But then again one of the reasons I went in the Marine Corps is my upbringing. You know my parents the way they raised us and the things that they to teach us meshed perfectly to what the Marine Corps had. And so you know it's...but to answer your question, yes.

Q: As a student of Military Science, has the United States been engaged in the positive military exercise since 2002 historically?

A: Well it depends on what you term positive. Interesting...an interesting way to look at it is that we were talking about before is Americans tend to like quick solutions and yet for the most part [Announcement over loud-speaker] the United States, the Second World War lasted four years. The Cold War lasted fifty years. And so if you look at it in terms of that perspective, Korea and Vietnam and all the incursions during that period of time were in fact perhaps just major or minor engagements with the same with the same overall enemy. You know, and so whether it's, it just seems to me that we're always going to be engaged and if it's beneficial to the United States then it's a positive. Now whether it's always a positive that remains to be seen, I mean you could argue the fact that Korea did what Truman wanted to do, return to the status quo. The communists north of the thirty-eighth parallel free south. Sure we went clear to Yellow Rivers suffered fifty something casualties fought for several years and it seems to many that it was a stalemate. In truth that was a policy of the United States not to engage in war with the Chinese. You know, not to release nuclear weapons, not to escalate a quote-on-quote "police" on Korean peninsula into a world wide nuclear exchange between the East and the West which very easily could have happened had China felt threatened and turned to the Soviets for support. I mean you know it was pretty shaky it could have gone either way and so in that sense it was positive. It may not have been a victory but it was what Truman wanted. Vietnam on the other hand, was different and yet the same. It was a

different enemy, different political situation in the both the United States and the South, some major miscalculations on the part of the Americans not understanding the enemy that they were fighting, not understanding the country, and so we made some real, real mistakes. Bottom line, all I can say is I saw a lot more people trying to get out of Vietnam when the Communists took over than were trying to get back into it. So I mean...

Q: What about the little skirmishes...I hate to call it that because people die in skirmishes...but Afghanistan, Granada, Lebanon?

A: Well you know, and there again is a reader of history. You know as well as I do that from the very beginning, American Policy has in many respects been a result of those very incursions. I mean how did we get Florida? Andrew Jackson went in...

[Announcement over loud-speaker]...you know Andrew Jackson goes in chasing the Seminoles. The Spanish aren't doing their job, this British are agitating the Indians and he goes in and hangs a few Englishmen and tells the Spanish it's time to tell and so we get Florida. Texas could arguably be considered the same way and so one of the problems that we all have is putting our perspective on historical events. We tend...that's a dangerous thing because most of us are wrong but whether it's good or bad...I think sometimes as a nation you have to be selfish and a little aggressive in order to thrive or even to survive. I don't think there's too many examples of smaller weaker countries being swallowed up by meaner countries. And so I...I still have a certain amount of...oh what's the word...belief that by and large when Americans have gone in, we've tended to do it for more of the right reasons than the wrong reasons. Now that's not always the case but I think...I think history would tend to think that there's more good that's come from American incursions than...[someone knocks on door]

Q: Do you need to pause for a minute?

A: Just for a second

Q: Ok go ahead and pause it. [Video paused and restarted]

Q: The last one I've got is especially as we've entered to World War II veterans and we've asked about our current conflict in Iraq, there's a...I don't want to say universal...but there's a strong feeling that the Guard should stay home and that the regular service are the ones that we should be sending over there, that the Guard shouldn't be there.

A: Right

Q: Umm, I don't know.

A: Well you know, that's, that's true but you have to understand too that, that what happened following the early seventies decision to go to an all volunteer force. Ok that cuts back your pool of active duty military. And so what the plan was, was we go all volunteer, we'll cut back the amount of service men in all services. Ok, well if we cut back that way then we've got to have some sort of reason, reserve. And so the Reserve becomes not so much or any less than state Militia, they become an integral part of the regular forces. They move completely out of oh you know the weekend warrior stay home you're fine, as long as it's here in the states. No with the all volunteer force, the Guard took on a tremendous amount of responsibility as the ready reserve for the regular forces. It changed the whole dynamics of how reserve and Guard forces were integrated into the big battle plan of the regular services. Because number one when you go all volunteer, and you don't have the ready man power pool that you had when there was a

draft, you have to have something that you can call up on a moment's notice. Well trained troops, there's none better trained than the Guard. I mean it's obvious. The 222nd's a perfect example. Why were they sent to Korea in 1950...because they were the best that the Army had available. Why were they sent again, why is the Guard continually sent over to Iraq and Afghanistan...because they guys are good. I mean stop and think about it, you look at a unit like the 222nd you've got a vast number of guys with a tremendous amount of experience. You know you've got guys doing jobs in the Guard that have got ten fifteen you know eight, nine, ten years in the Guard with that experience doing the same job that in the regular forces, you've got a kid nineteen years old barely out of boot camp. And here you've got you might have a you know a professional person with eight years in the Guard doing that very job. So of course you are going to use the best you have. And that happens to be right now the National Guard and Reserve because they've got the experience, they're good, good troops. Of course you are going to use them. And they are very much policy wise part of the regular, much more integrated than the regular forces than they were before the all volunteer force. And so that's why I think that the...and the World War II vets you know 90% of them were drafted you know and when you can draft you can tap into a wide range of people. Now we're kind of limited so you've got to use the Guard.

Q: If you could give some advice to the service men and women and women of today what do you think you would give them?

A: Just keep doing the job they are doing. I mean you know it's important, it's not always you know glamorous or clean even. You know but it's something that I think a lot of pride can be taken in. In knowing that you are doing something that number one needs to be done and number two is worth it.

Q: Ok thanks.

A: Thank you very much.