

DAVID WINFREY
Interview 126a
Mark Williams, Interviewer
Retyped by Courtney Lawrence

ABSTRACT: In this interview with Mark Williams, Vietnam Veteran David Winfrey recalls his time as an Army Staff Sergeant in Vietnam. He was injured by a booby trap and treated in hospitals from Vietnam to Japan to Alaska to Washington, D.C.

Mark Williams (hereafter MW): This is Mark Williams with Vietnam veteran, Mr. David Winfrey. Mr. Winfrey, where were you stationed and what did you do when you first entered the war?

David Winfrey (hereafter DW): Well, to answer your question, first thing I did, I got off the airplane. We were in Chu Lai. We stayed in Chu Lai for fifteen days. Well, my first job over there, believe it or not was a water conservation officer. A lot of people call them lifeguards. We would sit around during the day, sit in the tower and watch people swim and drink beer at night. A few things didn't work out right and I sort of ticked off the wrong person and I got transferred from Chu Lai to Cameron Bay. From Cameron Bay I went to Duc To.

MW: How old were you when you were there? Were there a lot of young men in your company?

DW: When I was first in the country, I was nineteen. Yeah, you know, most of us were young. Everyone was between eighteen and twenty-five, twenty-six years old. Mostly grunts. You know, there weren't too many officers being educated. When I say educated, I mean we had probably half the company that were not high school graduates. Probably twenty-five percent of those, couldn't read or write or spell their own name. Back in the sixties, Uncle Sam would take anything he could get. It was a very unpopular war. Again I was one of the few that had college and volunteered for the Army. I thought it was the thing to do. The majority of them were people that were drafted, ignorant and couldn't do anything else other than go in there and let someone tell them what to do - what time to get up and what time to go to bed.

Now, what was the first part of the question? What did I do? I was a grunt. An air-borne ranger assigned to an infantry outfit. First of all....the first time I was with the.....one and I was with the Ameri-Cal division. The Amer-Cal division station home base was in Chu Lai. And we were all in that area from oh, six or seven hundred days....

MW: And how did you receive your injuries?

DW: I was in the right place at the wrong time. No...I was...it actually started on Saturday night. We were laying there. We were out on patrol. It was the first time in three and a half months that the whole company had been together. And we were on what they called Twin Peaks. Or right down below Twin Peaks. And we had set up Saturday night

and everybody was just sitting around just shootin' the bull, taking turn on guard duty. Uh...heard five dud rounds hit the ground, so we went, "Hey, we get to go play trick-or-treat tomorrow, and look for those rounds." So we got up Sunday morning, took out through the brush, looking for them. Didn't find a thing. We came back in...you know...around fourteen hundred hours that afternoon...as close as I can get, it was Sunday afternoon, the chaplain was supposed to come out and we were supposed to get a hot meal. The weather turned off, and it started raining. We didn't get a hot meal. We didn't get a chaplain. The had a C.O. that said, "Well, we've spent enough time here, let's move out." We moved out and we set up on top of Twin Peaks and hey, we found one of the dud rounds. It was booby-trapped. It was a hell of a way to find one, but we found 'em.

MW: Were you moved from hospital to hospital? And what happened at these hospitals?

DW: Let me say one thing. I have done hundreds of these. You are the first person that ever asked me about the hospitals. Those people in those hospitals, beyond a doubt, are some of the finest, hardest working people you will ever meet. I mean, I admire them. Well, actually, I will say I love them, 'cause I am here because of them.

Like I said, I got hit on Sunday night, they flew me to a field hospital, where they stopped all the bleeding and everything, you know – a helicopter there. From the field hospital I went to a base hospital in Chu Lai. Because of all the nerve damage and everything I had, they flew me on to Cameron Bay that night. I stayed in Cameron Bay for twenty-one days. Seventeen major surgeries and that is where they removed, finished removing my right leg and did all the surgery and everything on my left leg, both arms, stomach, shoulder – you name it, and they operated on it. You know, I think they just operated to have something to do.

From there, they came in one morning and says, "Staff Sergeant Winfrey, you are going to be transferred to Japan." So they come in with litters and take everybody out. I got scared because when they started out the door, they took everybody and I was still there. The bus pulled off, and old Dave wasn't on it. They backed an ambulance up to the door and they loaded me in the ambulance. I got to thinking, "Wait a minute, these guys are riding in litter busses, and I am riding in an ambulance. I know something is wrong."

So they loaded all the litters onto the plane, and then they loaded me. Then we took the flight from Cameron to Japan. Landed in Japan and the same thing happened then. They loaded everybody and left me on the plane. Loaded the bus up.....Dave comes off the ramp, they put old Dave in an ambulance. Took me off. I said, "Oh, Lord, I know I am going to die 'cause all this special treatment." I spent eleven days in Japan, had four surgeries. That is where they put me in a complete body cast, what was left. Again, you know...during all this period of time...you see people that you knew, you see them dying. You can't do anything for each other, you know. You are relying totally on the doctors, nurses, and the Good Lord up above to get you through.

So anyway, after that time there in Japan, I was told that I was going to be transferred to Alaska. The same thing happens again. They load the bus, they move old Dave on an ambulance, and off we go trucking toward the airport. Only had a two-day layover in Alaska. Again the same thing, everybody goes off on a bus and I go off on an ambulance. They load us up and flew us into Andrews Air Force Base in Washington. D. C. unloaded the plane. Everybody comes out, put them down on the tarmac, waiting on the busses. Bring old Dave out. Put him in an ambulance. While I was there, a Colonel walked up to me and said, "Sergeant Winfrey, have they been treating you all right?" "Yes, sir." "You have been getting special care ever since the first day haven't you?" "Well, yes, sir." I said, "But when am I going to die?" He said, "Well, what do you mean?" "Well," I said, "I must be going to die from the way they are taking care of me." I said, "Because everybody else is being put in busses, and I am being put into the ambulances." And I said, "I think they are waiting on me to die so they can take me on to the morgue." He sort of laughed and said, "No." He said, "I knew your old pappy back years, and years, and years ago." And he says, "When I saw your name was on the manifest, Sergeant David W. Winfrey, Cline, North Carolina. And I knew the Jim Winfrey, your dad, lived in Cline." He said, "I knew you had to be his son." He says, "Just because of him, you got all this special treatment."

I tell you what, that guy was so nice to me that he let the ambulance driver, we were going from Andrews Air Force Base over to Walter Reed, we stopped at McDonalds. And I want you to know that McDonald's cheeseburger and shake were the best things I have ever sunk my teeth into.

MW: When you got back home, how did you feel about the protests in the States?

DW: (Laugh) Mixed emotions, mixed emotions. Uh...again, you know, I don't like killing. I don't like fighting. It's useless when countries can't sit down and talk and work things out as adults. Again, I have this hate for all these so-called hippies and protestors. You know, when you are coming in...I remember the first time I flew from Washington into North Carolina, this long-haired old...I had better not say what I think she is, spit on me and called me a "Baby-killer." You know...no, I didn't kill babies. And we did kill babies in Vietnam, but I didn't directly kill any. But I did see churches, and schools, and hospitals, and houses...I saw stuff like that built by the Americans. And I saw them torn down by the Americans. You know, that is part of war. Uh...my government says you are going over there, and I said, "Ok, I am going."

You know, again...it was not a war, quote unquote. It was a disturbance, or a police action. The same as Korea was. This was a political thing. The politician who had the most money, or their districts had the most money. Then they went out and got what they wanted. You know, if they had let the military fight the war the way the military should have, it would have been over in a couple of years, and we would have all been home. Nobody would have ever thought anything about Vietnam.

MW: Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW