Nancy Smoyer
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

LUCAS: So this is C.C. Lucas [‘21]. I’m at Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and I’m doing a phone interview with Nancy Smoyer. And she is in Fairbanks, Alaska, right now. It’s August 26th, 2019. So it’s evening for me, and for you it’s afternoon, right, Ms. Smoyer?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: And this is an interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. So, thank you for doing this interview today. Also, I already said that to you just before this, but we really, really appreciate it on behalf of the project. So, the first thing that I want to ask you is to tell me when and where you were born?

SMOYER: I was born in Washington, DC, on June 4th, 1943.

LUCAS: And you didn’t grow up in DC, though, is that right?

SMOYER: No. Yeah, we moved to Princeton, New Jersey, a couple of years later, so I grew up in Princeton.

LUCAS: What brought you guys to Princeton?

SMOYER: My father had a job with Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick [NJ]. As a lawyer.

LUCAS: Okay. So, what were your parents’ names?

SMOYER: Stanley and Barbara.

LUCAS: And you had three siblings, is that correct?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: And what were their names?

SMOYER: David, William and Janet.

LUCAS: So, David was older than you and the other two were younger.

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: Okay, so you grew up in Princeton, New Jersey, and what was that like growing up there, because it's a fairly small town, right? But there's a decent amount going on there, right?

SMOYER: Yeah. I mean, it's not small, tiny, but it's a college town obviously, and I had a wonderful childhood there, yeah. I went to a girls' school through high school there. There was a boys' school that went through ninth grade, and then they went away to prep school, those boys. But, yeah, it was a good place to grow up.

LUCAS: And, let's see, so you went to—what was the name of your high school?

SMOYER: Miss Fine's School.

LUCAS: So you went to Miss Fine's, and then, was it directly after that that you went to the University of Boulder?

SMOYER: The University of Colorado in Boulder [CO].

LUCAS: University of Colorado in Boulder. Thank you.

SMOYER: Yes. Yeah, I went—well, actually, in spite of the fact that Princeton was, at the time felt like a good place to grow up, I also realized that it was very East Coast, and there were things I wanted to get away from related to the East Coast. And so, I also wanted to go to a co-ed school, and so I chose a great big one, which was really a mistake, because it was too big for me. But I also loved the West and had been to Colorado and really loved Colorado. So, that's why I chose it.

LUCAS: What did you, growing up on the East Coast, because you enjoyed it, but what did you want to go and find that you felt wasn't there, or the things that you said you were trying to escape, or get away from?

SMOYER: Well, I was immersed in the Ivy League upper middle-class culture and East Coast "be all, end all" culture, and I knew there was more out there and wanted to get away from that.

LUCAS: I see. So you went, and while you were at Boulder, you studied French and you studied history, correct?

SMOYER: Yeah, history was my major, but sort of coincidentally I ended up going to France for a year to study in Bordeaux, and so that sort of ended up being a minor just because I had so many credits.

LUCAS: Yeah, you studied, was that your junior year?

SMOYER: Yeah.

LUCAS: And what was it like studying in France?

SMOYER: Difficult, I guess you could say, in that the French people were not very welcoming. It's gotten better since, but at the time they were not. And, so I spent most of the time with Americans and other foreign students: Germans, English, etc., so I really didn't get to—I was not immersed in the French culture at all. I lived with two other girls in a—we rented a room from a local person, but we didn't interact with them. So, it was kind of... It was a good experience, but it was an isolating, as far as French goes, experience.

LUCAS: Was that what you had expected when you went?

SMOYER: I didn't really know what to expect. I don't even remember what kind of expectations I had.

LUCAS: While you were there... So, I remember this from, it was a small part that was in your book, *Donut Dollies in Vietnam[*: *Baby-Blue Dresses & OD Green]*, which, and it said that while you were there, you met men who, they were going to be GIs. Is that correct?

SMOYER: No, not quite.

LUCAS: Okay.

SMOYER: There was a USO [United Service Organizations] in Bordeaux, and so we would, my roommates and I, girls would go down to the USO because it was a welcoming place in a country that was not welcoming, and it was also it was home. And so we'd listen to records and eat American chocolate. We went mostly during the day, and the GIs weren't there. But we did... They were GIs that were stationed in France, and so we did meet some of them. I have very few memories of actually that aspect of it. But what I did take away from that was that when you're overseas in a foreign country, it's very nice to have a way to touch base with home and to feel comfortable and welcome, which is what in part led to my going to Vietnam.

LUCAS: How did that contribute to your wanting to go there? Was that something that sort of started developing then as a, like a seedling of an idea?

SMOYER: Well, like I say, it was because I knew how it felt to be in a foreign country. But the war aspect had started a lot—the interest in war had started a lot earlier, I guess, primarily from when I read *All Quiet on the Western Front* [by Erich Maria Remarque] when I was in high school, and it just made me curious. And I also was interested in the Holocaust as a teenager and what had happened there. And so, just, when the opportunity to go to Vietnam came up, it was a combination of wanting to see what war was like, but also to help people that were there that often didn't want to be and to do what I could to bring them some—a taste of home, as we sometimes say, "a taste of home in a combat zone."

LUCAS: Sounds like a little rhyme. So, yeah, I remember you mentioning that you read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and that was an initial contributor to your interest in war. That sort of clarified for me at least a little bit how exactly it was. It's funny, because that book is about World War I, but you sort of felt that the takeaways were of sort of war is like—correct me if I'm not saying this correctly—translate across like almost any war. That was sort of how...

SMOYER: Yeah. War is war. And also, he talks about the after effects of war, the way they felt coming back from war. And I didn't realize it at the time how impactful what he wrote was, but when I reread it after being in Vietnam and learning about PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and the effects, I realized that what he described was exactly what Vietnam veterans went through and every other person that has—well, I shouldn't say every other person—so many other people have experienced after being in a war, the feelings. I mean, they go back to Bible times, the feelings of—you can read about it, and yeah. So… But, yeah, you know how you read, you may read a book in your teenage years and it can be life changing? And I would say in a way this was, reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* was, although I may not have realized it completely at the time.

LUCAS: Do you remember it being like—and did you read it for school?

SMOYER: You know, I'm not sure if I did or not. I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't know. I don't remember that part of it. I was pretty young, I think, when I read it.

LUCAS: Yeah. I mean, it sounds like it was like a really, really influential… Do you remember if there was—is there any portion of it that sticks with you still? Especially when you're describing these universal feelings. I liked what you were saying about it going back to the Bible essentially, like these are not new feelings.

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: And they go across all kinds of stories.

SMOYER: Yeah, well, actually I've given little talks on PTSD, and I will quote from the book, I'll read a passage from the book without saying who wrote it, what it is, at first. And, I mean, like there's one passage about—I can't remember it—but about how we won't be able to return to our life the way we were before. You can't just slip it back on like a sock. You can't just… And, so when I read it, and then I say, "That was written by a German soldier in World War I," I think it's really impactful to show that these feelings are universal.

LUCAS: Yeah, because you—like, I might have read that and thought that it was specifically something that happened because—and yeah, that's interesting that… This is something we can maybe talk about down the line, but that PTSD, it comes into play, would you say for more than just combat, right? For any experience related to a war? Or it could.

SMOYER: Oh, yeah, well, part of the criteria for PTSD is to have experienced a life-threatening situation. So, it's not just war either. It's an assault of any kind. Well, it can be a lot of different things.

LUCAS: Uh-huh. So, you read that in high school. And also, your father, so when he lived in DC, did he work with—I'm forgetting the name right now.

SMOYER: He worked on the War Board, on what was called the War Board—

LUCAS: Yeah, the War Production Board.

SMOYER: Yeah, which was the, I think it's the Department of Defense, what we call the Department of Defense now. So, he wasn't in the military. That was what he did during the war.

LUCAS: Did that at all contribute to your interest in eventually going to Vietnam?

SMOYER: No.

LUCAS: It did not?

SMOYER: No. I knew virtually nothing. I still know virtually nothing about what that was all about. I've always assumed it's just a lot of paperwork, but I don't know. I never asked, I don't really know why. I never asked.

LUCAS: And he didn't really bring it up either?

SMOYER: No.

LUCAS: So when you, can you talk about your decision to go to Vietnam? Because you were—so you had your junior year where you were abroad in France, and then you graduated the next year, and then there was a little bit of time in between. So, can you talk about how you came to that decision in those years?

SMOYER: So, after I graduated, I traveled and worked around the world for 15 months. I worked in England, Australia, and Israel. And during that time, that would have been in—I graduated in '65, and so that would have been in '66—'65 and '66—and the war was getting going, and so there were comments, you know; as I traveled in those countries, there were a lot of negative comments about our involvement there, and I really knew nothing about it, but I again just knew that guys were going, and maybe didn't want to go, and that they were in a war, and so I wanted to go and do what I could to help.

So, when I got back from traveling around the world, I had decided I wanted to go. And, so I looked into various ways to do it, and one was Special Services, and I didn't want to go into the military, so that wasn't it. But then I learned about this [American] Red Cross program, and it got women farther forward than any other women were able to go, other than reporters, journalists. And so I applied, and, oh, I think all you had to do was have a college degree and be a warm body, female body, and was accepted. And three months after I got back from traveling around the world, I was going to Vietnam, much to my parents' horror, I think.

LUCAS: Were they surprised? Or what was their reaction?

SMOYER: I don't know if you could say—well, I think they definitely would have liked to have had me home longer, and obviously they would be worried about going into a war. But, they never—the way they raised us, they never stopped us from doing anything. They gave

us a lot of independence. And I do remember my father saying he was proud of me, which was nice.

LUCAS: Was that before you went?

SMOYER: Yeah.

LUCAS: That is nice. You said—you sort of emphasized the, well, you said a "warm female body," which of course is the truth, right? That is what they were—that's what all the like 600 Dollies were, that was a criteria.

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: What do you think about it being an all-female program?

SMOYER: Well, that was the point. That was the point, to have… I mean, they had plenty of men around. They didn't need any more men. And, although, I mean, to be honest, there were male Red Cross field workers, which means, if I'm using that term right, they were people that took care of the business of getting messages back and forth to America, the normal Red Cross messages. Our role was completely different. Our role was to be morale boosters. Our program was called "Recreational Activities." And so, we had recreation centers.

But we also, the main thing that we did was to travel to the forward areas, the fire bases and LZs [landing zones], to take these programs that we made up, and just gathered the guys together and asked questions about sports or music or cars or the States or whatever, and these programs that were kind of a cross between a TV quiz show and a board game. And it was just a way for us to interact with them, and to take their mind off the war and to have a chance to see that there were some women that cared, "girls" as we were called back then. And then we also visited in hospitals, which was very hard. But, that wasn't required. We did that on our own. But the rest, the recreation centers and the games, were our job. It was our job. Great job.

LUCAS: When you initially interviewed and applied to be a Dollie, was that—

SMOYER: Donut Dollie. We don't typically say "Dollie." It's either—

LUCAS: Donut Dollie.

SMOYER: Both, yeah. Or sometimes [both talk at the same time] That's okay. Go ahead.

LUCAS: I'm sorry. Say what you were going to say. I want to hear.

SMOYER: Oh, I was just going to say I sometimes when I'm talking to us, the other ones, I call us, just call us "Donuts," but nobody else—but we don't say "Dollie." Some of the guys do, but we don't.

LUCAS: That's funny. You dropped the "Dollie" part, and others dropped the "Donut" part sometimes?

SMOYER: Yeah. But, typically when we talk about it, I mean, it's "Donut Dollie," the whole thing. [Laughter]

LUCAS: No, that's good to know. I appreciate the terminology is important.

SMOYER: Yes, it is.

LUCAS: When you applied to be a Donut Dollie, then, did what the job description actually was matter, or were you enticed by being pretty close to the front lines relative to other female positions that you could have had, aside from being a reporter?

SMOYER: Yeah. I really don't remember. I don't remember the interview, I don't remember how I found out what I knew about it. Well, actually, that's not quite true. My aunt worked as a volunteer at a Red Cross chapter in California, and she sent me—she's the one that told me about it. Maybe I read an article that described what we did? I don't really know. We pretty much went into it blind and unprepared. But, it didn't matter because whatever I did learn, I learned that it was the best fit. I mean, I had been in the USO in Bordeaux, and so I knew basically what recreation centers were like. So I knew that part of it. The Clubmobile, which is what we called the programs, that was new, but that was unique. That was unique to this program.

LUCAS: So your day-to-day work was primarily, well, it's essentially entertainment, like you said. It was fairly close to a TV show almost, but you were just doing it live for a smaller audience.

SMOYER: Yeah, but the thing to understand is, when you say "entertainment," one thinks of getting up there and song and dance. It was very much audience involvement. That was the whole idea was to get the guys involved in it. And it usually was very easy to do. It was a success if they would respond and get into it, and joke with us and,

you know, a repartee back and forth. The games were just sort of a means of allowing us to have an interaction with them.

LUCAS: So, would you show up to an LZ, or a landing zone (for anyone listening), and then you would do—what is the first thing you would do? Would these games be your introduction to the guys? And then, would you have time after to hang out with them or stay for a while, that kind of thing?

SMOYER: Yeah, well, depending on the situation. Sometimes it wasn't feasible or safe to gather people in a group, so sometimes we would just go around and visit in the bunkers, or gather a small group. But generally, or on a bigger LZ, they would gather in a mess hall or outside or whatever, and then we would launch into this. And we always started out, "Hi, my name is Nancy. I'm from New Jersey." And that in itself was enough to get things started. I mean, you know, some guy would call out, "Hey, I'm from New York. Do you know Joe Smith?" or… And then, another thing, good icebreakers were we'd say how long we'd been in country and, or we would ask who the shortest guy was there. And then they would start kidding among themselves, too, often and so… It usually didn't take very long to get them loosened up and ready to get into the spirit of things.

But, so basically, back to your question, "What happened?" So, yeah, so we would be picked up at the air strip, and then taken to wherever they were going to gather. And sometimes it was a big LZ, we'd go to several different areas. And then also, we would serve meals, you know, if it was lunchtime, and so we would just dish out their food, but that also gave us an opportunity as they came through the line to say something personal to them. I mean, it's amazing how, just as you're serving food, you can quickly come up with something to say, or they'd respond, and I got so I could recognize the different states they were from, just by their accent. I could identify different Southern accents, even though I'd had zero exposure to Southern accents before.

LUCAS: That's kind of amazing.

SMOYER: Yeah, yeah, it was fun. And oh boy, you could tell California guys because they always were—well, I'm generalizing, of course, but they were more relaxed around the girls. You know, some of the guys were just like, "Oh my goodness, what am I gonna say? There's a girl there." There's round eyes. But, the California guys would just be, "Eh, hi, whatcha doin' here?" kind of thing. It was funny.

LUCAS: That's so funny. Why do you think that might be?

SMOYER: I really don't know. And, you know, I'm generalizing, but still, it was something that I noticed. I don't know if the other girls noticed it.

LUCAS: Do you feel as though you became friends with these guys in the course of a day? Or some you would know much longer, but…

SMOYER: Well, actually, generally, when we went out to the fire bases and LZs, we really could not—I mean, we weren't out there long enough. You don't become friends with somebody with just a short time. The guys that we were able to become friends with were people at the base camp where we were stationed, either from the spending time in the recreations centers or just going to visits to the units that were stationed on the base camps, so they were still there. I mean, there was one unit in Cu Chi that I got Radio Research, and I got to be friends with them, and I would just go over there and hang out when I had time, and so… But generally, it was hard to form strong friendships because people were coming and going so much.

LUCAS: Did you feel, though, that you became friends with the Donut Dollies?

SMOYER: Yeah. Oh, yeah, we leaned on each other.

LUCAS: What do you mean by that?

SMOYER: Well, we were each other's support. Sometimes, in spite of the fact that it was wonderful being there, it was wonderful to be with the men, sometimes you didn't want to see another guy for another 20 years. And you just wanted to go to your hootch and be with the girls or be by yourself, and, you know, the girls understood that. We all felt that at one time or another. And then, you know, you'd get over it or some guy would be particularly sweet or friendly, and… yeah. But, there was overexposure to men, that's for sure. I mean, any time we left the shelter of our hootch, we were on show.

LUCAS: Really?

SMOYER: We were never anonymous. Yeah.

LUCAS: Was that—so would you have to always, if any time you leave your hootch, you are, like you're saying, on show, did you always have to wear your uniform, your blue dress?

SMOYER: No, we didn't have to always. But, again I'm generalizing but we always had to be nice. You know, if somebody wanted to talk to us, we talked to them. And there were times, obviously there were gonna be some other times, but… You know, generally, you go through life and you're in a grocery store and you don't interact with people. You don't smile at them. You don't drive by in your car and wave at every guy you see, which we did. Yeah, we were just constantly being looked at. And also, you know, you're just sitting there minding your own business, eyes are on you. So, but when we were working, we were always in uniform, but then in the evenings when we weren't working we were in civilian clothes, and we would go to various unit gatherings or go to an officers' club, sometimes in the EM club [club for Enlisted Men], but mostly officers' clubs, because either they didn't have EM clubs or it was just generally that we would go to the officers' clubs. But, anyway, so… But even then, even then, we were always on show.

LUCAS: How did you—like what did you make of that, either how you felt or… did you like it, to always be on show? I can imagine it might be a surprise at first, or a bit of a shock, going from a day-to-day life where you can be living your life for yourself, and then being like living your life in such a way where your job is to appear in as many other people's lives as possible in a positive way. Like what did you make of that?

SMOYER: Yeah. I don't really… Well, I describe in my book what I call my OJT, on the job training, which was I was at the recreation center at An Khe, and we would go in the back door, or the office door, and so I'd not gone out into the public area. So I looked out into the club, and all these guys were there, and I ducked back into the office and said, "I can't go out there. What am I gonna do?" And so, the other Donut Dollie that was there, she said, "Here, come with me." So, we went out, she said to some guys that were sitting at a table, "Can we sit with you?" and they said "sure." So we sat down, she asked our usual opening questions, and within about a minute she then left and went back to the office and there I was, and just talking. I don't remember what we talked about or anything, but… And I guess it was just sort of instantly getting—if not getting used to it, you're just instantly thrown into the fishbowl. I don't remember it bothering me, except as I say, there were times when I was just really sick and tired of men. But I don't remember thinking, you know, *Why are they always looking at me?* or anything like that. You just got used to it. You just…

LUCAS: Would a lot of your interactions, would they sort of vary in—because I know that there was—you said that you dated a guy from Alabama briefly. Were some interactions, like was it generally friendly? Not just you, but for the Donut Dollies in general, like would you guys sort of process the level to which things would be a mix of friendly and flirtatious, or was that even the case?

SMOYER: During the—when we were working during the day and doing what we were doing, I would say it was friendly with just a hint of flirtatiousness. But we didn't—I mean, you didn't—we didn't go there to be flirts. We didn't go there to…

LUCAS: Oh. Yeah, that wasn't what I was implying, sorry.

SMOYER: Okay. I mean, and then the dating was just, well, I was gonna say normal dating, but it can't be very normal in a combat zone. But yeah, I mean, we, because we were all college graduates, we were in our early 20s, and the guys were generally two or three years younger. And we mostly just viewed them as younger brothers or just friends, you know. We weren't looking at them as anything other than just guys that we wanted to make feel better.

LUCAS: Yeah. I didn't mean like what were your intentions so much as, I guess, what you might have discovered in the environment where you are, just, where there are not that many women. But that makes a lot of sense. Did it feel…

SMOYER: Well, let me just say one thing that I did benefit from, which was that I was not a very secure person. I had not dated hardly at all in college and stuff, and so, I wasn't that comfortable around guys when it came to being around them. I got over it. Being surrounded by men and starting conversations with anybody cured me of that. And yes, it was an ego boost, but it was in reality, I mean, if you had any common sense at all, you'd know that it wasn't because of you, who you were. It was because you were a round-eyed woman. And, but nevertheless, it was a nice feeling.

LUCAS: So it sounds like you adjusted pretty quickly to that ability to just walk up to someone and start talking with them.

SMOYER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LUCAS: Were there any other women at the LZs or wherever it was that you would be hanging out with the rest of the Donut Dollies and the GIs?

SMOYER: Well, there were nurses. But we only interacted with them basically when we were in the hospitals. And there were Special Service women who had libraries, little libraries in places, and I think they were sort of mini-recreation centers, but not… But I don't even ever remember going into one, or maybe one briefly. And then at big areas like in Da Nang there were USOs, and Saigon area and stuff there were USOs. But, I mean, we actually in Da Nang, the area called Freedom Hill, they had a USO and a Red Cross recreation center and a PX and a lot of stuff. But no, we were basically the only women. I mean, I'm not even sure if on the LZs, certainly not on the fire bases they didn't have nurses, or at least, I don't really even know. I probably should stop trying to speculate the thought. I'd be wrong. I don't want to…

LUCAS: Regardless, it sounds like you didn't interact with them a lot, if there were any?

SMOYER: No. No. We actually, in An Khe we shared; our BOQ [living quarters] was in a rectangle with the day room on one end, the latrine on the other end, and then on one side was where the Donut Dollies and on the other side were the nurses. And it's really strange to think about this. Even though we were sharing a day room and sharing the bathroom facilities, I don't remember talking to a nurse. I don't remember saying, "Hi, how's your day going?" or anything, which is just really weird to me.

LUCAS: It might be a little weird. I imagine… Oh, what were you going to say?

SMOYER: Well, I don't want to—again, I hate generalizing, but one has to sort of generalize. We Donut Dollies had played games. Nurses saved lives. And they, I think to some extent, and rightfully so, saw us as lightweights, whereas they were doing the heavy lifting, and we, although it didn't really prey on us, we were aware of that. But there were times when we would be in the hospital, though, and a nurse would come up and say, "Would you go to talk to this guy? He needs somebody to talk to him." So, they did appreciate that we brought something that they couldn't because they were doing their work, you know. They were working; we were there just to chat. And I have to say that, I think since the—in the aftermath of it all, we've come together and supported each other in a lot of different ways, the women that were there. And in fact, a really good friend of mine that I see when I go to DC is a nurse. And she has real, what I would call Donut Dollie qualities, and I assume I have some nurse qualities, which don't include medicine, but the caring. And so, we see that in each other. Yeah.

LUCAS: Yeah, I mean, I imagine, even though you said that it was difficult to start conversations sometimes, it seems as though you developed characteristics, and to some degree, skills. Like it takes, even if the nurses might have thought that you were being lightweights, you still had—it takes skills to be a symbol and also to have a presence, don't you think? That's what it sounds like they recognized.

SMOYER: Yeah, but I'm not sure that it would be realized under the—until later.

LUCAS: Do you feel like it was realized later?

SMOYER: Yeah.

LUCAS: By just anyone who might have been involved in the war? Or are you talking about nurses?

SMOYER: Well, I was talking about nurses. I mean, I'm sure they—I don't know. I mean, they see positive qualities in what we did and we certainly see positive qualities in what they did.

LUCAS: Uh-huh. Yeah, it's essential work, both. Another thing about being… So generally, if you were in an area, Red Cross was trying to keep you guys safe; they wouldn't send you somewhere that was dangerous. So if you were around, it also meant that you were a symbol of safety. Is that how it felt? Or is that also like an impression that you thought you guys represented?

SMOYER: We were less safe than the nurses, for one thing, because we were flying on helicopters, driving in Jeeps on roads, going to fire bases, going to LZs. I mean, it hasn't happened to me, but there are stories of the girls flying in a helicopter that was called away to do a combat mission, and they… I think I'm combining in my mind two stories, once in one situation that they got dropped off at a place where they were not expected to be dropped off. I mean, it was with GIs, but, you know, who knew if the helicopter had gone down or whatever. Anyway, it wasn't safe. And then, our base camps were mortared, and during Tet [Offensive] they were mortared practically nightly for a month. And mortars don't choose.

LUCAS: Yeah. You described largely in your book Tet being like very much so the kind of thing—like you had to sleep in a bunker sometimes, correct?

SMOYER: Yeah, I don't remember that we actually slept, but we did have—we had bunkers with bunks. At one point they built an underground bunker at Cu Chi for us. We did have an aboveground sandbag bunker, and then as Tet continued, or the aftermath continued, they dug one underground that had bunks. But we didn't want to stay there.

LUCAS: You didn't want to stay there?

SMOYER: Well, you didn't want to sleep there. You wanted to go back once the attack was over, or they said it was over, yeah. Just go back to your beds.

LUCAS: When an attack was coming, was it apparent before it actually happened that you would have to go in the bunker?

SMOYER: No. No, there are no sirens or anything. At Cu Chi, one of the other Donut Dollies and I would be the ones that would hear the mortars coming in in our sleep and be calling "Incoming" to wake the others up. There's a different sound. There would be outgoing mortars a lot, and then when the incoming mortars start, there's a different sound, and we could recognize it in our sleep and just run to the bunkers.

LUCAS: Was that a sound—was there ever a time when it was surprising? I thought that your very first night in Vietnam, there was a mortar attack. So maybe you were already familiar with the sound?

SMOYER: Well, you're right. You know, I did, I wrote about that. There was an alert. And maybe there was a siren. I don't remember sirens. I don't know how we knew it was an alert, and I don't remember any mortars coming in or anything. There were sometimes alerts that maybe they were mortaring another part of the base camp or something. I don't remember the details of that. Strangely, there are a lot of things I don't remember very many details about. If I didn't have my letters home, I—and even they are pretty sparse.

LUCAS: Do you ever listen to your tapes as well? Because I know you have letters and tapes, or had at one point at least.

SMOYER: No, I've never listened to them. I should, but I haven't. Yeah.

LUCAS: Well, I think it was in one of your tapes, actually, when you were talking about the Tet Offensive, you said—and I guess this is what would almost be objectively true—that it was the closest you have

come to real danger. In fact, it was. You were up against real danger.

SMOYER: Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, when you get mortared every night, yeah. And they did hit the headquarters, which was less than a hundred yards from us, and it was pretty well demolished.

LUCAS: Oh, my goodness. So it was demolished and you were probably, I mean, you may not remember, but probably in the bunker adjacent to it?

SMOYER: Yeah, yeah. We were in the bunker.

LUCAS: Wow. And did you stay—you stayed there after, or through Tet, though? They didn't move you?

SMOYER: No, they offered to, to move us to Saigon, which I'm not sure would have been a whole lot safer. But no, we chose to stay. Although there was one girl that had been assigned. She was new in country, and she'd only been at Cu Chi, I don't know, a few days, not very long, and she couldn't handle it, so she left. But the rest of us that had been there a while, we… I mean, it wasn't the first time we were mortared. We had been mortared before, but just not so much. And also, they started rocketing, and rocketing was scary. It had a whistle, and it just seemed scarier than the mortars.

LUCAS: Did they do both at the same time?

SMOYER: I don't know. I mean, yeah, they were mixed up, I guess.

LUCAS: The girl who left, why did she leave? Did she go to Saigon or did she go home?

SMOYER: I don't know actually. I know she went to Saigon. I don't know what happened to her after that. She was just scared. I mean, it's not to say—I don't remember being scared, but I probably was. I remember one girl started crying a lot. But she's not the one that left, I don't think.

LUCAS: Do you remember how you were reacting when the attacks would happen?

SMOYER: No, I don't. Like I say, I don't remember being scared, although I may well have been. I don't remember being terrified. I'm quite sure I wasn't terrified.

LUCAS: I mean, that's pretty amazing, I guess. Did it all feel like a turning point in your perspective? Because Tet ended up being, it was the start of a turning point in terms of where the power was in the war. Did you feel anything like that at the ground level?

SMOYER: You know, I'm gonna pause for a moment. Can you hit "pause"?

LUCAS: Yes, absolutely. I'll hit "pause." [pause] Okay. So the question—actually I just repeated the question to you off recording, but it should—yeah, you can just go ahead and talk. Sorry.

SMOYER: Well, I have to think about it for a minute, because I certainly—I have to think about what I knew at the time and what I know now, and I was actually thinking *I wonder if I said anything about this in my letters*, but I certainly think it did change things for the country, for the United States, because… Yeah, and I think when I was over there, I mean, you realized—we realized they could hit any time all over the country, instead of just in little pockets. And it did sort of, I think it sort of just made it seem all futile, that they really had control over, or like I say, could hit any time all over. I'm not making much sense there, but I…

Although, as far as the political aspect of the whole thing, I went over not knowing what was really going on over there, and even though even while I was there I really didn't know anything about the big picture, only sort of knew my little microcosm of who I was with and where I was, but, and also I didn't form an opinion whether the war was right or wrong, whether we should be there or not. We just didn't have discussions about that, either among the girls or the men that I remember. But I also didn't want to really form an opinion, because there were guys that thought it was okay and those that didn't, and I didn't want to interfere with their thoughts or denigrate their thoughts. And so I was what I would say apolitical, and it was a gradual thing when I came back when I just realized that we should never have been there in the first place. And that's the overriding feeling that I've had very strongly ever since.

LUCAS: I don't want to completely deviate from your time in Vietnam yet, but I am curious about how you felt your perspective sort of crystalizing when you came home, or changing, because you did say in your book like you just said now that you tried to stay apolitical. I didn't realize until now that it was out of a sort of respect that you tried to do that. But yeah, that's a lot.

SMOYER: Yeah. Actually, that's an interesting way of putting it, that you said "out of respect," yeah. So, okay, coming back. When I came back,

three months after I came back, my younger brother [Billy Smoyer '67] went over as a Marine lieutenant and was killed three weeks later after he got there. So, obviously, my coming home was different than most people's, and very difficult. And after—I think it was nine months after I got back, I decided I would go back into the Red Cross and work in recreation in a military hospital, because I wanted to still be with the men. And so I did, I went and worked at Fort Knox, Kentucky, for about a year. And that was good for me to have sort of a re-entry, a way to not just totally shut Vietnam out of my everyday life. I mean, I was thinking about it. I mean, I think about Vietnam every day now. So it wasn't like it was shut, but it gave an outlet for it.

LUCAS: Anywhere in there, was it—yeah, I mean, there's a lot that I want to touch on there, but we can sort of work through those things as we go. But you said that you sort of went to Fort Knox as a way of—these weren't the words you used, but keeping that door open. You said not shutting out Vietnam immediately. Do you think that was, were you doing that as you were sort of grappling with changing political views, or had you already come to some sort of idea about Vietnam, or was that before, when you decided that you wanted to keep the door open?

SMOYER: It didn't have anything to do with my political views, whether I did that, went back to work for them or not. But, they solidified while I was there. Yeah.

LUCAS: How so?

SMOYER: But again, you know, I'm working with wounded guys. So again, I'm not expressing my thoughts. But I knew people that were in the underground Vietnam veteran groups. I knew a little bit about that and stuff. I mean, I knew they were around. So, I mean, yeah, the anti-war feelings were certainly growing, so, were growing, yeah.

LUCAS: So, while you were in—I just want to cover also for the record that in Vietnam you were stationed in three different locations, right?

SMOYER: Right. I was at An Khe with the 1st Cav [Cavalry], Da Nang with the Marines, and Cu Chi with the 25th Infantry Division. They moved us around so that we wouldn't become too attached.

LUCAS: Interesting. Did they tell you that?

SMOYER: No. We figured it out later.

LUCAS: What do you mean by that?

SMOYER: Or at least… Well, I mean, nobody, unless you were in a bad unit or something was wrong with where you wanted to be, nobody wanted to be moved. I didn't want to leave the Cav. I really didn't want to leave the Cav. But, it wasn't a choice we were given. And I do think, I mean, they were wanting to keep us unattached, or not overly involved, I guess you could say, in a way. Because the longer you stay in a place, the more you're going to get to know particular units, and that particular unit's going to get hit, or, you know, people you know are going to die, or you're going to form romantic relationships, which a lot of us did, which are not necessarily bad, but if you keep moving people around, then it's harder to do. And I think there's some benefit in that. I mean, I think there's some validity for their thoughts on doing that.

LUCAS: Yeah, that's what I wanted to ask about. How did you feel about being on the hard end of—you know, because what they're doing, that decision, is a decision about you guys, the Donut Dollies, and, but it's for your own good, but also painful. But maybe less painful than staying might have been. I guess you don't know?

SMOYER: Yeah, I don't know. I know I was really fortunate in the units that I was sent to. I wasn't sent to any non-combat units and rear echelon groups. I would not have done well there. And the one big regret I do have is that Cu Chi didn't have a recreation center, and that was the time when you could spend more time just being with the men. But we sort of figured out other ways to do that where you could just hang with them. But, I was really fortunate in my tour. And the fact that I got to experience the different cultures of the Army and the Marine Corps was eye opening to me, and especially since my brother went into the Marine Corps, it was really good to have been there assigned to them.

LUCAS: Yeah, I remember, because that was your—it was at Cu Chi or Da Nang where there were Marines?

SMOYER: Da Nang.

LUCAS: Sometimes I have skewed pronunciations, thank you for correcting me. You wrote about how it was a little bit difficult to get to know the Marines, I believe because they were just busy, and also you didn't see them as much because of the setup of where you were staying in the station.

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: Do you want to talk about that?

SMOYER: Oh, Marines were shyer, too. And they had a lot less exposure to—a lot of the Marines would just stay out in the bush for weeks, months, on end; whereas the Army would come in more often, and so they really would… I mean, you could imagine just generally if you're out away from any kind of normal cultural things—I don't mean song and dance. I mean just normal life. And then suddenly you're encountering these girls in blue dresses, who were speaking American to you. I mean, they would go for months without seeing a woman in the bush. So, they were definitely experiencing culture shock. And then they'd come into the recreation center and just stare at us.

LUCAS: Was it harder to reach them in the way that you were describing earlier with your—

SMOYER: Yeah, it was sometimes, yeah. I actually don't have—now that I think about it, I really don't have that many memories of doing our programs with the Marines. But I'm sure we did, so I… I hate it that I had so many blank spaces with my experience there.

LUCAS: In Da Nang?

SMOYER: Just everywhere. But, now that we're talking about this, the more I think about it, yeah, it's sort of a big blank as to what… Maybe after we're done with this and I think about it some more, I'll think about it some more what it was like in Da Nang. Most of my memories were in the recreation center there.

LUCAS: Do you think that you have, like with the blank spaces that you're describing, is that maybe just because these are things that you haven't thought about in a while? Or do you feel that things that you—there are some moments just across, you're in Vietnam, that you remember really well? And does that highlight to you that there are blank spaces, or do you just focus on things that you do remember? Because you said you think about Vietnam almost every day.

SMOYER: Yeah, right, that's true. There just are blank spaces. Like, I don't remember where we ate. I don't remember eating, normally, unless it was an unusual situation. Yeah. I just, yeah, have blanks. I mean, the eating is maybe because it was unimportant.

LUCAS: Maybe. Yeah, it's funny because you do remember serving food, at least sometimes, right? But you don't remember eating?

SMOYER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I mean, I can picture that. I can picture myself doing that. I can picture some special meals and that sort of thing, but not just the run of the mill thing.

LUCAS: So, at the time when you were with the Marines, did you know at that point that your brother was going to enlist once he graduated from Dartmouth that year, right?

SMOYER: Yeah, he was already in some kind of a program at Dartmouth. It wasn't ROTC. And it's been explained to me multiple times, but I can't quite get my mind around it. But it was gonna happen.

LUCAS: Yeah, there were a lot of, I think between 1962 and 1969, there were—well, I think this is a lot, but maybe it's not; you have a better sense of this—there were 24 male graduates, because Dartmouth was still not co-ed, who became Marines. So, there were 24 guys. So, I don't know if they all went through that program or not, but it sounds like a pretty established path at Dartmouth.

SMOYER: Yeah, well, several of Billy's classmates were in the program.

LUCAS: So you knew that he was going to do that?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: Did that change how you looked at the Marines as you were watching them? Were you thinking about…

SMOYER: Yeah, it did. Yeah, one of the things that I noticed is that the Marine officers were more distant from the men than the Army officers. I mean, officers, there's always a distance, but it was more like it was… I don't know where I got that sense, but I did, that it was stronger. Yeah, go ahead.

LUCAS: Oh, is there something you wanted to say?

SMOYER: No, I don't really. It's not a formed thought.

LUCAS: Yeah, neither was mine. So, it's okay. Well, if you think of it, definitely interrupt me and say it. But, so your brother arrives in June of 1968, right?

SMOYER: In July.

LUCAS: July of 1968. And he was a 2nd lieutenant upon entry?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: So, had you—you got home in, was it April?

SMOYER: Yeah, it might have been May. I think it was May.

LUCAS: Was he home when you got home from Vietnam?

SMOYER: No, he was finishing his training at Quantico [Marine Corps base].

LUCAS: Oh, okay. So you went back to Princeton for the summer, right?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: And how were you feeling—I remember this was, I loved this part in your book—you wrote, you and other Donut Dollies wrote letters to yourselves, right? The letters were similar to ones that would get sent home to families of GIs when they were going to come home?

SMOYER: Oh, the Donut Dollies coming home?

LUCAS: Yes.

SMOYER: You mean that?

LUCAS: I do.

SMOYER: Oh, well, we didn't write them to ourselves.

LUCAS: Oh, did you write them and send them home?

SMOYER: Yeah. It was like a joke. I mean, you know?

LUCAS: Yeah. Oh, no, I understand that it was a joke. I thought it was funny, it was clever. So, when you were leaving Vietnam, how were you feeling?

SMOYER: When I was leaving Vietnam?

LUCAS: Yeah, toward the end of your tour, yeah.

SMOYER: Well, I was tired, I was wanting to come home, I was sick of the war, but I didn't want to leave the men.

LUCAS: And you were in Cu Chi at that point? That was your last base?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: So, you were ready to come home, but not ready to be gone, sort of.

SMOYER: That's a good way to put it. Yeah.

LUCAS: And then, you got home. What was it like to be home?

SMOYER: Well, just a passing thought here before I… This is kind of hard to talk about, or it kind of catches me, because like I said, I didn't want to leave the men. It was such an all-enveloping feeling of caring so much for them. But, I also couldn't go back, I mean, especially after Billy was killed. I couldn't go back. I would not have been able to repeat the feelings, you know, I wouldn't be able to get it back again. Some of the girls did go back. They'd go back for a second tour. But, it's almost like too much damage had been done to go back and be the light-hearted person playing games who didn't realize the full cost of the war, so… So in a way, going to the hospital, working in the hospital, was an interim or, you know, a different way of doing it. Because even though, yeah, we were still doing recreation, it wasn't the same. They weren't in combat anymore.

LUCAS: Yeah. It's like you're home, but in Fort Knox you're with a lot of the people you will be helping. It'd be like you're in this new location, but with very overlapping experiences that you've just come from in Vietnam.

SMOYER: Right, right. Yeah, that's a good way of putting it, too. Overlapping.

LUCAS: You said, and I don't know if this something that you can or even care to define—it might be difficult—but you said the full cost of the war?

SMOYER: Which is people like your brother dying.

LUCAS: So, people, the cost.

SMOYER: Well, the cost to me was my brother dying. But, there are a lot of costs. I mean, you know, there's tons of costs to tons of people in different ways. And, yeah, PTSD and stuff like that.

LUCAS: Yeah, that's an interesting way of putting it, because it's there were tons of costs to tons of people. That's just interesting. Yeah, there are so many, and I probably couldn't start to count them, you know.

SMOYER: Yeah, and they're individual for each person. I mean, one of the things that one of, actually some man that Billy trained with, I think he's the one that said that there's usually one death that was the most important one or that changed things or that turned things. And in his case it was Billy's death. But, you know, something happens and you're not the person you were. And you could have gone through all kinds of training and there could have been maybe some people killed before, but then, *the* person is killed, and… Yeah.

LUCAS: That's a really… I'm just thinking about what you were saying.

SMOYER: Yeah. Billy's death devastated so many of his Dartmouth friends. Anyway, I'd just as soon leave that there.

LUCAS: Yeah. If you want to take a break from talking about that, is that what you'd like to do?

SMOYER: Yeah.

LUCAS: Okay. Absolutely. I appreciate you talking about it. I know that there's a lot that I don't know, and I appreciate you pulling upon any of that, and even stuff that you may not have worded before. So, thanks for doing that. So, let's go back to Princeton. You get home, and then you go to Fort Knox. And you've talked about that a little bit. From there, so that was—was that '68 or am I messing that up?

SMOYER: No, that was '69.

LUCAS: Oh, '69. Yeah, that's right, because you went in '68. From there, what I gather from, I mean, well, especially from your book—your book really becomes the heart of a lot of what I do feel like I understand so far—you were in so many places. I don't want to make you just talk about that all at once or anything. But, what did you do after your interim, as you described it, at Fort Knox?

SMOYER: Well, this gets really kind of, well, not so much complicated as… Well, anyway, I'll just rattle through it, because it doesn't particularly interest me. [laughter]

LUCAS: Oh, okay. All right, I won't make you talk about more things that are rattling…

SMOYER: Yeah, I mean, I sort of continued to flounder and figure out what to do, and I went to San Francisco and worked as a secretary, and then I, oh, you know… Then I…

LUCAS: Chicago, maybe?

SMOYER: Did some more floundering around. Then I eventually came to Alaska in ’72.

LUCAS: Why did you decide to move to Alaska?

SMOYER: Well, I had been briefly here, and then decided to settle in Fort Collins, Colorado, and when I was there I met a couple that was driving up, and I thought *this is my chance to go back to Alaska*. I drove up behind them, and then never left. Although I do travel a lot.

LUCAS: Yeah, you do. Well, so you just drove up behind a couple? Did I misunderstand that?

SMOYER: Yeah, right. They in their car, me in mine. I just didn’t want to make the drive myself, and they were coming up and I thought *hmmm, I can go to Alaska*. Alaska had an allure that it does to a lot of people, the adventure and stuff. And it’s a good place for Vietnam veterans. They don’t have—not a lot of the rules and regs of the lower 48, and it’s a good mixture of people, and… yeah.

LUCAS: That’s interesting because yeah, you said that you had just—you recently helped out with a veterans event, and you said there were 380 or so veterans. And I was like *wow, that’s a lot*. I mean, I can imagine a lot making the trip, but you’re saying that it’s a place where they live?

SMOYER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there’s a disproportionate number of Vietnam veterans—well, veterans. I’m not sure if it’s Vietnam veterans or veterans in general here, a disproportionate percentage of veterans that live in Alaska.

LUCAS: And it’s because, I mean, even if they’re not explicitly thinking or saying this, you are tracing it to, like you said, the lack of rules and regulations that are so tightly applied?

SMOYER: Yeah.

LUCAS: Where I am right now, I guess. Well, I'm in New Hampshire, I don't know about that, but you know…

SMOYER: Yeah, I do think that has a lot to do with it. And also, living in the woods or living in non-normal situations is not unusual, you know, so you can get away with a lot of—you're not weird if you live in a cabin with no running water. It's just, you don't have to live up to society's expectations.

LUCAS: Do you think it's hard for them to come back to society's expectations after the war? Or do you think that's something that they eventually might realize that they don't want? Like not initially upon coming back, but they sort of…

SMOYER: No, I think it starts initially.

LUCAS: You do?

SMOYER: Yeah, because, you know, Vietnam veterans weren't accepted. They were disparaged and everything. So, you withdraw, withdraw, withdraw, and Alaska was a good place to withdraw to.

LUCAS: I hadn't really thought about that. That's interesting.

SMOYER: Yeah. I mean, even people that haven't been to Vietnam withdraw up here, you know, isolate.

LUCAS: Yeah. In a way that's—it's also, I've been to Alaska one time, so, and you live there, you know, way more. And I've never been to Fairbanks. But, like you were saying, it's a place where in all the isolation there's also a lot of, like you can have a lot of outdoor adventure and just, it's probably like—do you think that in Vietnam it's sort of similar? I mean, not that they're doing it in the sense of an adventure. I don't think that's quite appropriate to say, or maybe it is. But, do you think that it's similar, like you're just constantly in this outdoors environment. It's almost like you've gone into the woods—Vietnam is not the woods—but you've gone into the woods with these other guys.

SMOYER: Well, I see what you're saying. I see what you're saying, and I think there's maybe a little bit of an element of that. You're in a wild country, in a way. But, it's hard to live here. And maybe that you keep the edge, you keep the adrenaline going, to some extent. Adrenaline is a huge thing that combat veterans deal with. I mean, if you know anything about Iraq and Afghanistan, and what they deal with when then come home, because you're just… Adrenaline

really changes your body and changes your mind, and then when it's not there anymore, or it is there when it shouldn't be and stuff, it's… And yeah, I mean, you know, just going outside your door in the winter, wondering if you… I mean, one winter when I lived up here, I had eight flat tires in the morning because of the cold. So I'd get up, I'd see I have a flat tire, go back indoors, put on warm clothing, go out, change my tire, and they knew if I wasn't there on time, I'd be 20 minutes late, because it took me 20 minutes to change a tire.

LUCAS: That's pretty good.

SMOYER: Yeah, well, it's just, you know, there are a lot of things that keep you on edge here. I suppose it would be true in a dangerous city as well, too. But, anyway…

LUCAS: Maybe. But, that's interesting because that's a lot more about danger is human to human, and this is, again generalizing which, I guess, like you were saying, we should try not to do so much, but yeah, I think a lot of what you're describing is you versus the almost invisible factors or things that will always happen in that kind of climate.

SMOYER: Yeah, that's true, the invisible stuff, yeah. The elements.

LUCAS: It's interesting, because I remember at the beginning when we were talking, you brought up—you said you were trying to escape Princeton and then you went west. Then you went even more west. It's just I'm trying to picture Fairbanks next to Princeton, New Jersey, which I have seen.

SMOYER: Yeah, there aren't too many similarities. [laughter]

LUCAS: No.

SMOYER: I should say in defense of Princeton, when I have gone back as an adult and finally got some maturity and not so critical, I should say, of Princeton, I have come to really appreciate it and appreciate the friendships that my parents had and the good people and the good values which I didn't respect at the time. So, I grew up. And then also, just so you know, if you could see my house, it looks a lot like Princeton.

LUCAS: Does it?

SMOYER: I have wallpaper. I have double-hung windows. I had my house built for me. I have a lot of things that look like my house in Princeton, or an Eastern house. So I haven't really left; it hasn't left me completely, by any means.

LUCAS: As far away as you are from there, you rebuilt your house.

SMOYER: Yeah. I mean, there are certain aspects of it that you don't see in most Alaskan houses. Double-hung windows, they leak. Yeah.

LUCAS: So, can you tell me a little bit about being in Fairbanks? Because that's been your home base even as you've done all of this travel, and volunteer work, too, which I want to get into. But just, yeah, being in Fairbanks. You described kind of why you went there, and the environment you've built, and that it's a veterans—or that there is a big veterans community. Is there anything else that's sort of notable when you think about it as a character?

SMOYER: As a character?

LUCAS: Sort of like in, I think that was a—I don't know, I kind of want to take that word back. More as like a player in what you've done for the last 50 years?

SMOYER: Oh. Well, I suppose part of it, it's related to what I said earlier, when I came here, I didn't have any skill. When I went to college, you didn't go to college to get a skill. And I didn't—I was still floundering, you know, what to do. Vietnam preyed heavily on me a lot. Anyway, so what I ended up doing was secretarial work for 20 years, temporary secretarial work, because I found that once I knew the job, it was too boring to stay. Six months was the longest I stayed at any job. But I was able to get jobs at the university, for the most part. I've also sort of attributed, speaking of adrenaline, changing jobs, changing bosses, changing locations, changing everything kept the adrenaline up in a way, because you could never really settle down because you never really knew what was going on. And then when I did know what was going on, I left. So, in a way, speaking of Alaska meeting my needs, it met my needs in that respect.

And then, also I was struggling with what to do with Vietnam in my life, and finally I decided—and I had started volunteering at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial just a couple months after it was built. When I was back home in Princeton, I went down there and just started as a volunteer at the Wall. And then, after a few years struggling with Vietnam, I decided I just would immerse myself in it,

and so I went back to Washington for three to five months at a time for, I think eight years, and volunteered at the Wall, and helped sort through the stuff that was left at the Wall where they took it. And then I also worked on a program through the organization called the Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and there was a program to connect families who had lost somebody in Vietnam with veterans who knew that person, so I worked on that. And, so I sort of had a double life, living in Washington doing that, and then coming back to Fairbanks and doing temporary jobs.

And, after doing that for a while, I decided I would see a therapist. Well, I had seen a therapist on and off for other times, but I was talking to a therapist, and she had gotten her degree in psychology at the university. And I had thought about going back to school when I was in my early 30s to get another degree in psychology, but I thought I was too old. And so, when I was 50, also in combination with seeing the therapist, I went home—this still blows me away—I went home and was talking to a friend of my parents, a woman who was 10 or 15 years younger than my parents, and she had just gotten her law degree at age 53 or something like that. And she said to me, "Nancy, in two years you're going to be two years older, with or without a degree." And it was like this lightbulb went on, you know. *I can go get a degree, and maybe I'm older*. So I got a degree in psychology, a master's degree, and then I was very fortunate that I was able to go work at the vet center as a counselor immediately, and so I did that for 11 years, and then I retired. But, so that was also a way of keeping Vietnam as part of my life, in a stronger way than just thinking about it, you know.

LUCAS: Had you been wanting to do something stronger than thinking about it? I mean, you also worked at the Wall, obviously, but…

SMOYER: Yeah, so that's what I had done, and so this was just another way of doing it. But basically, otherwise when I was here, I really didn't have, I don't feel like I had much connection with anything tangible to do with Vietnam.

LUCAS: When you were—so it sort of became a little more tangible. Were you a counselor mainly, was it only for Vietnam veterans?

SMOYER: Yeah, at the time it was before the Iraq, Afghanistan veterans were coming in. Just sort of when I retired, they were just starting to come in. So yeah, it was primarily Vietnam veterans. And because I had been to Vietnam, there was a connection there, you know. They felt like I wasn't just some woman that didn't know anything.

LUCAS: Yeah, kind of like you want people when they talk with you, like you were saying earlier, to sort of know what they're talking about, so you don't have to—like, how could you possibly do counseling on either end if you had to explain everything?

SMOYER: Yeah, exactly.

LUCAS: Or all the stuff that you don't need to explain. You would never get around to things you do need to explain.

SMOYER: Yeah, terminology and stuff. If I had continued, I would have wanted to and had to read a lot of books about—by Iraq, Afghanistan veterans in order to get the terminology, in order to try to get the feel. But I really realized, even though I never, you know, walked in the jungles of Vietnam, I was never on a combat patrol, I knew what it was like to be in Vietnam. I knew the heat, I knew the humidity, I knew the feel for the country, I knew the Vietnamese people, you know, at a distance. I realized I didn't know what it was like to be in what they call "the sandbox," I don't know what it's like to be in a dust storm, I don't know what it's like to—that whole environment, even though I've been there on trips. And so, I really felt a distance from them, or I didn't feel that strong connection. Even though I knew they would walk in and I'd know—oh, well, you know they'd say three or four sentences and you'd know they've got PTSD just like everybody else's PTSD.

LUCAS: So you retired pretty soon after they started flooding into the area? That's what you said?

SMOYER: Well, yeah, I mean, it just happened that—and when you say "flooding," they didn't flood into the vet center. They're still not flooding into the vet center. They're very reluctant to get counseling, unfortunately, because they need it.

LUCAS: Do you think—well, I guess when you were talking to Vietnam veterans, it wasn't immediately—oh, no, it could have been immediately after they got home, I guess, depending on—

SMOYER: No, no. Not when I was—

LUCAS: That's right. You got your psychology degree first.

SMOYER: Yeah. This would have been in the 2000s, I don't know.

LUCAS: Yeah, so fairly recent.

SMOYER: Yeah, in the course of…

LUCAS: That's interesting, though, like some things… You know how you were talking about *All Quiet on the Western Front* and it sort of translates, or like some of the experiences that were described, you said like you found it to be true that they were experiences you would find, you know, some iteration of them in any war.

SMOYER: Uh-hum.

LUCAS: But then when you're sitting across from someone and you've shared you've been around those kinds of experiences, but in different places, somehow it's not as relatable.

SMOYER: Yeah. I don't know, maybe it's… Yeah, I don't know, there are a lot of levels to that.

LUCAS: Yeah, that's true. I don't think that's something—sorry, I wasn't really asking you to like figure that out.

SMOYER: This is sort of an aside, but I watch *Star Trek*, and I was just watching one—it's on here during the day—that I've seen before where the counselor who has mental telepathy capabilities, she lost her capability for a time and she felt totally lost, even though she was just like normal like us, where you intuit things or you notice things that you don't realize you're noticing. She felt lost without her mental telepathy ability. And I think that's in a way how I felt with the Iraq, Afghanistan ones. I just didn't have that intuitive inner connection that I had with the Vietnam veterans. And also, I mean, I'd been through years with them, whether I was really with them or not, you know? We shared all those years of dealing with Vietnam in our lives.

LUCAS: Yeah. So it was you were almost in different places, like it wasn't just that it was two different wars; it was like you had been through a lot of time—like you've kind of been getting at, the war stays with you, so you've been holding the war, you know, you and veterans.

SMOYER: And they, yeah. Yeah.

LUCAS: Yeah, that's a lot. Is there anything else you want to say about that? I am curious about the Wall, but I would love to keep talking about this if you want to.

SMOYER: No, I can't think of anything else.

LUCAS: So, okay, so the Wall is—or the official—here, I'm trying to call the official name, just for the record.

SMOYER: Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

LUCAS: Vietnam Veterans Memorial. So, you volunteered there, and did you say that you still volunteer there a little bit? Or have recently?

SMOYER: Yeah, I do. I go back every Veterans Day for several days, and sometimes in between. Um, C.C., I'm kind of running down. Not that I want to stop, but I have a commitment I should go do. Is it possible to—I mean, you know, talk about the Wall or other stuff, is it possible to continue this at another time?

[Begin Part 2 of Interview]

LUCAS: All right. So, this is C.C. Lucas. I am at Baker-Berry Library at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and I'm doing the second part of a phone interview with, I have Nancy Smoyer, and you are in Fairbanks, Alaska. And today is August 31st, and our last part of the interview was on August 26th, and it is 2019. So, this is an interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. And yeah, thank you for being here again on the phone with me. All right.

So, we wanted to talk about some things that we didn't get to last time, and most of them are… or rather, just like the time at large that you, or like what you've done in your time after Vietnam. And we covered a lot of that. But, I know one thing that you brought out and we touched on, but didn't really get into talking about, was the Memorial Wall in Washington, DC, because you volunteered with them for how many years was it? And you still go back sometimes, right?

SMOYER: Yeah, I go back every Veterans Day for sure, and sometimes in between. But yeah, I am… Well, the Wall was built in 1981, and I was aware of it, but I was not fully aware of the impact and how important it was and the parade that they had when it was built and the celebration which I was really sorry to miss. So, I went home—it was dedicated in November and I went home to New Jersey two months later and went down there, and actually that's when I started volunteering. Yeah. And I've been doing it ever since. Then when I went back to DC for periods, months at a time in the '90s, I spent several days a week volunteering at the Wall.

LUCAS: Oh wow. Was that one of your—so, what brought you to DC?

SMOYER: Well, as I think we discussed before, or maybe not, I had been trying to figure out how to deal with Vietnam and what part it should have in my life, my everyday life, and I kept struggling with that. And finally I decided to just do it, and go back to Washington and immerse myself in Vietnam. And so, that's what I did, and I did that for eight years, two to five or so months a year during that time.

LUCAS: So, to be clear you were, at this time where were you permanently living when you would go to DC for a few months?

SMOYER: I was in Fairbanks and I would go in the winter here, January to… Yeah.

LUCAS: Okay. So, did you decide when you were like—I mean, when you decided to go to DC, did you already have in mind that you were going to volunteer? Or did you just want to go and see how you could be involved with the Wall?

SMOYER: No, I knew I was going to volunteer. Yeah, that was it. And then, I also, and I can't quite remember how this came about, but there was an organization called Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and one of the projects that they had started was to connect people who had lost somebody in Vietnam, families who had lost somebody in Vietnam, with veterans who knew that person. And so, I helped with that. And then I also helped with cataloguing the things that were left at the Wall. So, once a week I would go out to that warehouse and help sort through the stuff, which was wonderful.

LUCAS: What sorts of things were left at the Wall?

SMOYER: Well, everything but the kitchen sink, and I wouldn't be surprised if there was a kitchen sink. But seriously, they had, I mean, one of the most extraordinary things was a motorcycle, a specially made and painted motorcycle that hadn't been ridden and was made to be left at the Wall. But, everything. There are some really touching things that are left. I mean, a couple of my favorites are, and this happens fairly often, is a little whiskey bottle, you know, one of those little airplane bottles, and one's empty and one's full: "one for me and one for you. One for the guy on the Wall and one for me." And then another is a guy that used to leave one cigarette and he would write on it, "It ain't wet but it ain't broke." Things like that have a lot of meaning to Vietnam veterans, and it's just very sweet that the guys would do that sort of thing.

LUCAS: Did you observe any—like, so who would come visit the Wall?

SMOYER: In the early days it was just veterans and families, and it was incredibly moving, because they were the ones that really cared and it meant something to them. And there was a lot of emotion. And it was really worthwhile to be there. When I went back early on, I was staying with a Red Cross friend that I had known in Vietnam who lived in the area, and some days when she drove me home at the end of the day I would cry and tell her stories and cry. She said to me, "You know, I know this is hard for you, but I know you have to do it." And it really was something I needed to do, a way—I needed to connect with the veterans again, and also with the families to a great extent, but it was mostly the veterans, the men who had been there.

LUCAS: What do you mean when you say "connect with the veterans"? I mean, I know they would visit, but what was that like? What did it mean to connect with them?

SMOYER: Hmmm. I don't know, I guess just be a part of their world or do what I could to help. I don't remember that I told them very often that I had been there. I mean, I don't very much now, but I can't remember if I did back then. So, it wasn't necessarily that aspect of it, but it was just to be with them.

LUCAS: So, since you continued volunteering there, and it used to be a lot of veterans, do you find that it still has a composition of like the people who visit, or anything about like the number, the type of people who visit has changed?

SMOYER: Oh, tremendously, yeah. Yeah, it's sometimes kind of disheartening to be there because there are tour groups that don't really care or there are kids' groups that are on their phones or chatting that are disrespectful. Not all of them, but often. But, before it was just people that cared. And the veterans felt freer, I think, to do what they needed to do there when there weren't many people in the first place, but also when they were there with other veterans. And now it's like people are watching or, you know, they feel out of place because there are so many tourists, and there's just a whole different feel. However, on Veterans Day is the time when veterans come back, and so that's really nice.

LUCAS: Do you think that the crowds of people who do go at all deter veterans from going because of the different environment like you were describing?

SMOYER: I don't know that it deters them, but it certainly diminishes the experience, I think.

LUCAS: You said, you know, in your book you talked about a lot of, most of what you had to say about the Wall or chose to put in your book was small—or not small, but many instances of what you called Wall magic. Do you remember that?

SMOYER: Right. Oh, yeah. Wall magic is amazing. What?

LUCAS: Yeah, what were you saying?

SMOYER: Well, it's just something that I don't know how that phrase started among the volunteers, but these just amazing coincidences would happen over and over and over again. And it's when it happens to a visitor, they're like "wow, that is just incredible." And we're like, "Yeah, Wall magic. Yeah, we know. Wall magic." I mean, we still love them, but it doesn't surprise us anymore. I mean, one of the times for me was when two people—I can't quite remember this very clearly—but anyway, two people were looking at one name on the Wall, and one was a veteran who'd known the man in Vietnam and another was a high school friend of his, and they both had named their first child after the man on the Wall, whose name was Chris. So, and both of their first children were girls, but they named them Chris. And, you know, when they discovered that they were looking at the same name, it was just so cool. And that's just one very small example of that. In fact, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial puts out these little books, practically pamphlets, on different subjects and one of them is on Wall magic, just story after story.

LUCAS: Why do you think that it becomes called magic? There's the strong sense that there's coincidence happening, and maybe that feels unlikely or impossible, but what do you think made it sort of become a phenomenon?

SMOYER: I don't know. I mean, I can't say. It's just, it just happens. So many visitors. And I don't know. 58,000, over 58,000 names, and… I mean, when I've been at the Wall, three times that I've been there people have come and asked for my brother's name. So, nobody that served with him, but so it's sort of in a way it's happened to me, as well, personally.

LUCAS: Do you tell them that he's your brother?

SMOYER: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LUCAS: Do they tend to be people that you know or that you didn't know of at all?

SMOYER: No, actually, one of them knew my other brother and one of them knew Billy in a different context which I can't quite remember. Actually, I can't quite remember.

LUCAS: What—oh, there was one other thing I was going to ask. Oh, so you chose to work at the Wall because that was the most—what you at the time you decided to do that, did you think that this is—why was it like *the* way to re-immerse yourself in Vietnam, as you were saying earlier? Why was that the way you chose to do it? Or were you thinking of other things you might do?

SMOYER: Well, somewhere along the line we had a vet center. They started a vet center here, and I sort of got involved with that, but couldn't really figure out a niche at the time of how to interact with the veterans there. Oh, I know. They also had a rap group here which I went to. And I did that for a while, I can't remember, and then that sort of faded away. I can't remember. Oh, I know what I was going to say also. It's like veterans for the most part aren't able to visit the graves of their friends, and so this, the Wall, has become sort of the graveyard of their friends, and so that's part of why it's so moving. It's not only… And also, they can feel like it's a shared experience, especially if there are other veterans around, but just sharing with the names on the Wall.

LUCAS: So, will you elaborate on what you're saying about it being a graveyard, or similar to a graveyard, or in place of one? Have you always thought of it that way? I just think that's a really interesting idea, because it is names on, they're on stone, right? They're written into stone?

SMOYER: Uh-hmm, engraved.

LUCAS: And are they close together? I think I've seen a picture and they're in rows, right? Or columns?

SMOYER: Right, rows, yeah. So, the way it's arranged is that it's arranged chronologically so that the people that died on the same day, their names are together. And so, if a veteran comes and is looking for a buddy or a certain firefight where several people died, he can see those names together.

LUCAS: Oh, and presumably could he then, he might run into someone who was looking, you know, who lost someone in the same exact event?

SMOYER: Yeah, uh-huh .Yeah. That can happen.

LUCAS: It's sort of an interesting arrangement for a memorial, like in a good way, but just that it's sort of organized toward, like it's chronological instead of alphabetical. There's definitely some thought behind that, it seems.

SMOYER: Maya Lin did a wonderful job, and it was very controversial to get it built, because it was black and underground and people had all sorts of negative feelings about it. But, during the time that I've been there I've only heard one negative comment about it. Otherwise, people are so moved by the way it's arranged, by the way that it takes you down away from the noise of the traffic that's right, practically right on Constitution Avenue, which is one of the main streets in Washington. But, you feel protected by the Wall and it has a really strong… it's very powerful. In fact, it just made me think about what we call the tree vets, you know, there's the empty area in front of it, a field, but then there's a tree line, and there often are veterans that will hang out back in the tree line because they are reluctant to get too close to the Wall and see the names.

LUCAS: Oh, so they, do you think they come to visit and then they all hang out, or they sort of migrate over toward the trees?

SMOYER: Yeah. Well, you see individuals up there, especially in the early days. And if we as volunteers would see somebody that was there in the tree line for a while, we would go over and talk to them, just because, just to see how they were doing. And when I say a tree line, it's not dense, but there are trees back there, and also tree lines were safe in Vietnam. You were protected by trees; you weren't out in the open. You can feel very exposed at the Wall. In a way it's protected, but in a way it's pretty exposed as well.

LUCAS: That's funny, then, there's something about the trees. Have you ever brought that up to one of them you've talked to, like "oh, other veterans come here"? And also, hanging out with the trees, as opposed to going to the Wall. Because yeah, that is funny that it would be something that they would have sought out, or like taken shelter supposedly around the trees, and that they would also do that near the Wall.

SMOYER: Yeah. Is that a question?

LUCAS: Yeah, I was just sort of like thinking out loud, I guess. Like, did you ever bring it up to them? “Oh, look, you’re by the trees.” Or “a lot of veterans come to hang out here,” or something like that?

SMOYER: Oh, we sometimes will tell them that, yeah. If we go over to them, we’ll say, we’ll tell them they’re not alone, that other people do that, too.

LUCAS: Yeah. When was the last time that you…

SMOYER: It’s important for veterans to know that the things that they do are normal. It’s a lot of dealing with PTSD is to know that their reactions are normal reactions to their having been in a war, and so it’s normal to want to be in the trees.

LUCAS: Can you ever, can you sort of like tell when someone who is a veteran has PTSD? Or do you have ways of telling, or is it something that becomes apparent over time?

SMOYER: It’s pretty quick. It’s pretty quick. I think many of us—I guess I won’t try to pick a percentage, but many of us who were in Vietnam may not have all the symptoms of PTSD, but there are eight or nine symptoms, and the chances of having one or two of them are great. No matter how well you’re doing in your life normally, there are effects that you could very well have. And they could be exacerbated when you’re at the Wall as well: hypervigilance, just the whole stress of being there, anger, sadness, yeah.

LUCAS: How do you feel when you’re volunteering at the Wall?

SMOYER: I feel comfortable. As one of my friends said to me after I’d been there for a while, she said, “You’re comfortable down here, aren’t you?” And I am. It’s like coming home.

LUCAS: Coming home, how so?

SMOYER: Just being in a good place, being where I have friends, and by that I don’t mean individuals, I just mean people that shared the experience of being in Vietnam and being at the Wall and stuff. It’s just a comfortable place to be. And also I feel like I’m doing something that is helpful.

LUCAS: Yeah. A lot of the ways that you described both, I mean today and then also last time we talked, you sort of becoming involved in Vietnam. Like you'll describe them as if they’re things that you’re

doing largely for yourself, but they also tend to be volunteer oriented or activities that help other people. I've just noticed that. Is that something that you intentionally kind of seek out or does it maybe have something to do with that comfort feeling?

SMOYER: Well, I think it goes back to how I was raised. My parents were both very involved in the community and in doing things for people, and it was just, I guess that's what I saw. And as I said, I think it just feels good to do something for other people. Yeah. I don't really know what more to say about that.

LUCAS: Yeah. So it's just more like a way that you've always been, I guess like you started as a volunteer before, like what you did when you went to Vietnam was volunteering, too. So it's not, what you're saying, like it's not necessarily something that you picked up in order to sort of like figure out how to continue being involved in Vietnam after you were there. It was just volunteering is something you've done, or like picked up on.

SMOYER: Yeah. And as I said, it was wanting to be involved with veterans again, and so it was something for me, you know, but it happened to be something that could be helpful to others as well. I've always said even for somebody like Mother Teresa, you don't, when you do something for other people, you're doing it for yourself. You wouldn't be doing it as a masochist unless you're sick, you know. You get something out of it, too.

LUCAS: Yeah. Maybe like there's not a huge difference between selfishness and selflessness at some times, or they can work in the same way, like when you're doing something for other people, exactly what you're saying. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I also, this sort of bring me around to another thing that I wanted to talk about, and was you went back to Vietnam in the '90s, right? Early '90s?

SMOYER: Uh-hum. That was for me.

LUCAS: You said that was for you?

SMOYER: That was totally for me.

LUCAS: [laughter] Mother Teresa. What do you mean by that, it was totally for you?

SMOYER: It's because I had to take care of myself. I didn't want to go back. I was carrying a lot of anger towards the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese people, along with anger at the American

people and the American government, the American people for the way they had treated Vietnam veterans. But, I knew that my feelings toward the Vietnamese people particularly were not rational because they were sort of roped into it just as we were, and just as the GIs were. And, so I knew from my travels and stuff, I was pretty sure that if I went back, I would get over those feelings, but I was surprised that it took several days before it really hit home about how much they had suffered. And when that happened I had done what I wanted to go back for, I'd accomplished what I wanted to do. And also, the Vietnamese government, I mean, I know they did some really terrible things. So did we. But, I also knew that my feelings had changed, or whatever, clarified about the war that they just wanted one country, and that's what they were trying to do. Things didn't go well, you know, as far as what we had hoped would happen. But, I don't really, I don't carry that anger anymore toward the Vietnamese.

LUCAS: So, was the anger that you keep referring to, was that—or do you ascribe like what, either way—it was toward the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese people, but what was it from specifically? Because you're talking about sort of like a national, like the way that you felt [both talking at the same time] about the war being in America after… but yeah, what do you mean by the anger?

SMOYER: Well, I mean, you could pinpoint it directly to *they killed my brother*. But of course, that's totally irrational, and because it was one person that killed him, one bullet or RPG [rocket propelled grenade] or whatever it was that did it. But it was just, you know, as I say, it wasn't rational. It was all the hurt that had been brought to all these veterans that I knew. I mean, I can't even really explain it because it didn't make sense, but I knew I was still mad.

LUCAS: So, and you carried that… You went back in 1993, and you actually went with the Restoration Project, right? The Veterans of Vietnam Restoration Project?

SMOYER: Veterans Vietnam Restoration Project.

LUCAS: Veterans Vietnam Restoration Project. So, you go back and you're doing a project renovating a clinic.

SMOYER: Right. In Cu Chi, which was one of the places I'd been stationed, where I was stationed during Tet. And it was fascinating because the men, the Vietnamese men that we were working with had been very involved in the Tet uprising in that area. One was in charge of

the whole uprising. Another one was in charge of munitions. There was also a doctor, a Vietnamese doctor, and one of the men in our group had had a serious leg injury, and the doctor was fascinated by talking to this man about his wound and what the doctors had done to take care of it. And so there was just this feeling of shared, of a shared experience. I mean, the man in charge of munitions, in a way he was the guy shooting the mortars at me as I was cowering in the bunker. And, but it was okay. I mean, he was doing what he thought was right.

Also, one, I don't know if he was the mayor of the town or some sort of official in the town, invited us to his house for dinner, and during the course of the conversation at the dinner he—I rather reluctantly told him that my brother had been killed over there, and he had had, because he had had two brothers die there and he never found their bodies. So, their pain… Every house had pictures of somebody that had died in the war, and so every person there was affected by the war deeply, whereas here in the States, you know, people just went along in their merry lives oblivious.

LUCAS: But you didn't feel like you were one of those people. You felt like you were around a lot of people like that in the US?

SMOYER: Yeah.

LUCAS: So, was it a surprise—like, when you went into houses and saw pictures of people who had died in the war, was that sort of, was it more that it was like surprising for you or rather just like you needed to see that in order to like really realize that there was pain on the other side, too?

SMOYER: Well, I guess it brought it home. It brought it home. I mean, I guess you could sort of assume in a way that they were all involved, but when you see the pictures on the wall… I mean, we didn't go into that many homes. I don't mean to… But yeah, it was… And when I went back to Vietnam, we went to, I think it was at Cu Chi, yeah, they had a museum, and names were written on the wall in gold of people that had died. And I can't remember if they were civilians and military, probably both. And I just stood there with a Vietnamese woman who was showing it to me and I was just asking her about the names, whether they were men or women, because I couldn't tell from the Vietnamese names, and there were a lot of women on that wall. And, you know, they had their own wall. I mean, we shared a wall.

LUCAS: Did you tell them—do you remember like…

SMOYER: I think I did, yeah. You know, they—some of the men, some of the Vietnamese veterans knew about the Wall. We gave them a pin. I gave them a pin from the Wall. Yeah, they had heard about it. They also knew about our PTSD, and I asked one of these men if they thought they had that, and they said no, because they knew what they were fighting for. I thought that made a lot of sense. And also, they were treated well by their country. I've said for years that PTSD has come not just from being in Vietnam from what happened in Vietnam, but from what happened when they came home: 50/50. If the veterans had been treated well when they came home, the effects of the war would have been greatly diminished.

LUCAS: Why do you think that is? That's interesting, yeah.

SMOYER: Because the guilt and the shame and the being put in a closet and not being allowed to talk about it was overwhelming, and the best thing they could have done was to talk about it, to try to get it out there and to be accepted and to have it, to understand that that was what happened over there, but that doesn't mean that it has to pervade their life. I heard a really touching story about one man that came home. And when I talk about a man coming home, we're talking about somebody who's 20, 21. I mean, they're still kids in a way. And he came home and he would go out drinking every night, and then he'd come home in the wee small hours or maybe like 4:00 or 5:00. His father, who had been in World War II, would be waiting for him at the kitchen table, and they'd sit and talk, and then the father would go to work, his blue collar job. And, but in a way he talked his son home.

LUCAS: That was really sweet. How do you think that kind of thing fits in with what your perception of—so, how you perceived the national feelings about the war afterward, particularly, like how veterans were received and treated? Because that's, yeah, that story is really touching, but it seems to not align with the kind of place that lets you develop PTSD so easily, or not so easily, but you know what I mean by that?

SMOYER: I'm not sure I follow what you're asking.

LUCAS: So, I guess one thing I'm wondering is what was it that you, how did you see like veterans being received and treated in the US?

SMOYER: Well, like I said, disparaged.

LUCAS: What did that look like?

SMOYER: It means if they apply for a job and say they were in Vietnam they were refused an interview, or they're looked at as "oh, you're one of those crazy Vietnam veterans." You're branded. You're marked. And so, people that, even people that were married for years didn't tell their wives that they had been in Vietnam. People could work alongside each other for years and then discover after 10 or 15 years that they were both in Vietnam. I mean, it's not healthy to not talk about traumatic experiences, or even if it wasn't particularly traumatic, even if you had a safe job and weren't particularly in danger, just the fact that you were in Vietnam branded you, like you had a scarlet letter on your forehead.

LUCAS: Do you feel like it was something that people made an effort to keep secret or rather, though, they just didn't talk about because it wasn't easy to talk about it?

SMOYER: People made an effort to what?

LUCAS: Keep, like sort of keep the fact that they'd been in Vietnam almost a secret?

SMOYER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, they kept it secret.

LUCAS: Have you noticed that kind of thing or heard about that being the way that people were received from other wars? I mean, I know that essentially we were on the side, we fought for the side of Vietnam that lost, but is that, do you think that's why…

SMOYER: You've got to be careful when you say that to a Vietnam veteran. You don't say that to a Vietnam veteran.

LUCAS: Oh, I'm sorry.

SMOYER: Unless you know their feelings.

LUCAS: How are you supposed to talk about it? I am genuinely curious.

SMOYER: I don't know. I just wouldn't use those words, unless I knew that they felt the same, you know? People might say "we threw it away," "we left." Some people will say "we didn't lose any battles that I was in," you know, that sort of thing. It's just… I mean, that's another stigma. That's another stigma: *it's the only war that we've lost*. *Oh, so you guys are losers*. *Yeah, why didn't you win your war?* Oh, yeah, and then the veterans organizations at the time would not allow Vietnam veterans to join because *they weren't in a real war*. It

was never a declared war. I don't know if that was their reasoning or just that they… Those older veterans didn't welcome them back. I mean, heck, when you're not welcomed back by your own kind, it's just, it's just unbelievable, unbelievable.

LUCAS: That is really unbelievable. I didn't realize the degree to which, especially if other veterans who, you know, it's like you probably went through a lot of the same experiences while you were in the war, to then not be allowed to like be part of a group that essentially lets you, you know, like probably find more people to relate to on that basis, like to not be, to have had similar experiences but then have that status as a veteran sort of denied because the war was illegitimate.

SMOYER: Yeah, and in effect, by their fathers. And speaking of fathers, not the ones in the veterans organizations so much, but the World War II veterans came back and also didn't talk about it. They just for the most part settled back into their work, and bottled up whatever had happened for the most part. But, the thing that didn't happen to them is that they were welcomed back. They had parades. They had all kinds of things to…They won the war. And so, they were praised. And hence, the effects of the war were mitigated by that. But at the same time, they had PTSD. I mean, you can talk to a lot of Vietnam veterans who will talk about demonstrations of their fathers' PTSD. It could be drinking, it could be anger, outbursts of anger, it could be bottling, you know, being silent. So, it's not like they didn't have it. It just wasn't really recognized.

LUCAS: Was there—I'm not sure, I mean, this isn't extremely relevant, but it just made me wonder, is anybody else in your family aside from you and your brother, have they been involved in any war directly?

SMOYER: No. Well, actually, my father's brothers were, but they were in safe situations, I believe. Actually, I shouldn't—I don't really know. I never talked to them at any length, but they weren't in combat as such, I don't think.

LUCAS: Okay, I was just wondering about that because I was thinking about, yeah, if you had someone the generation before you who had been in a war, what it would be like to then be home with them if you were experiencing similar PTSD or similar experiences of post-war. That's interesting. I also, one other thing that I was thinking about and wanted to ask you about was the show, *China Beach*. I discovered that you were talking to people who were on the set of the show, and they asked you—and correct me if this is

wrong—they asked you if the way that they were portraying the Dollies, which you were, was an accurate portrayal in the show.

SMOYER: Well, as it happened, the day I visited the set there were two new girls coming into country in the story, and they had not yet filmed that part of it, and so they were asking me—we were talking about it and I just told them how exciting it was and I had great anticipation and was really excited and wasn't scared. And that was kind of surprising to them because they thought I would have been scared. I don't think any of us were particularly scared. Well, we didn't know enough about the war for the most part, I don't think, and we just liked the men, just thought, yeah, we'd survive, we were fine. So anyway, yeah, so the girls on the set said that they were going to portray it differently than they had thought.

LUCAS: So they initially were having the actors be like a little bit scared of arriving in Vietnam and you were like "that wasn't really the case," and so they changed it?

SMOYER: I don't know. I don't know what they were having them do, because I talked to them in a trailer and I didn't see the scene itself being done.

LUCAS: Did you feel at all that, because we're talking sort of about veterans not being able to, not having the sort of like welcome environment in the US after they returned, or even like a lot of outlets, like they weren't really welcomed into places that could become outlets for them to talk about what happened, did you feel like that was the case with—did you feel like there were similar types of misunderstanding or not being welcome as someone else involved in the war like a volunteer like you were?

SMOYER: Oh, yeah. I mean, I still rarely tell people that I was in Vietnam. I do sometimes, if I feel like rattling their cage or whatever. But, yeah, I mean, it's just so strange. And then, you know, I just don't want to deal with "oh, what was it like?" or "oh, my goodness…" so I just don't tell very often, even though it's a major part of my life.

LUCAS: And did you feel what you described was almost like, well, sort of like there's almost a hostility or at least there was early on toward veterans, did that exist as well for like other groups of people who had been working with the war, or was it not as directed at you?

SMOYER: Oh, no, I wouldn't say there was any hostility toward me. I didn't feel that. Not me personally, no.

LUCAS: Do you think that was because, so would it be primarily toward GIs? That was the bad…

SMOYER: Yeah. And I was a girl and, you know… And I only told specific people. I didn't tell people I was going to, you know… It wasn't like I broadcasted it and just waited for the reaction.

LUCAS: Yeah. So, in terms of, though, the other thing that we wanted to talk about, and we talked about this right before we actually started the interview, was your involvement with Dartmouth. And that was another piece of what you've done since the war. So, do you want to talk at all about sort of what your involvement with Dartmouth has been?

SMOYER: I've been involved with Dartmouth since I was born because my father went to Dartmouth, and my mother's brother went to Dartmouth, and my two brothers went. So, I have a strong Dartmouth heritage. We lived in Princeton, and the last game of the year, football game, was every other year held in Princeton against Dartmouth and we would have a big party. And, so Dartmouth has been a big part of my life, and I don't know when I first went to the campus with my parents, but I did. And I guess one of the… well, gradually I became more involved with Billy's class, I think just because so many of them stayed in contact with us. And so anyway, so I went back. I was encouraged by them to go back to a reunion, I can't remember which. But anyway, and then after that or at some point they adopted me as an adopted member of Billy's class, which has been really nice, really huge. It's kind of funny to go back and the guys will say, "I don't remember you being in our class." But it's really…

LUCAS: "Because I was there."

SMOYER: Yeah. It's quite an honor. And, you know, Billy, everybody knows who Billy was. Whether they knew him at the time or not, everybody knows. And I still have the name Smoyer, so yeah. And so I've been back, I went back to the 50th reunion and I've been back a couple of times to the class reunions, Billy's class reunions.

LUCAS: What do you mean that everyone knows who Billy is now?

SMOYER: Well, he's one of two men in the class who were killed in Vietnam, Robby [John R.] Peacock ['68] being the other, and so that stands out. People know. As you probably know, your professor does give a seminar, does seminars at reunions about Vietnam, and this last reunion that we had, there was a two-hour long seminar talking

about different people's roles during Vietnam. Two of them had been in Vietnam, one had gone to Canada, and one was a protestor here. And it was just wonderful to hear the comments from the men, and how they felt about things back then and how they do now. And I think for the most part the feeling that I got from the men at that seminar was that they didn't feel—they weren't critical of the people that chose to go back then, or that went whether they chose to go or not. They weren't critical of the individuals. They were critical of the war.

LUCAS: Is that sort of a—you say that like it's different from how a lot of people look at it.

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: Like to be critical of the war than the individuals.

SMOYER: Right, yeah.

LUCAS: Does that—so, when you come to the reunions, do you feel like you've become friends with some of the… because you said they adopted you as an honorary or a real member of the class, of Billy's class. Do you feel like you've developed relationships with any of them, or friendships?

SMOYER: I'm sorry, what was the last part of that?

LUCAS: Do you feel like you've become friends with any of the people in Billy's class?

SMOYER: Yeah, yeah, I have with some of them. Some of them, as I say, I've known through the years because they've stayed in touch. So, Warren Cook ['67], Charlie Hoeveler ['67], others in other classes as well, because they knew Billy well through sports.

LUCAS: Yeah, when he was at Dartmouth he was on—he did multiple sports, right? Wasn't he on a couple of sports teams?

SMOYER: Yeah, he took spring off, but he was on fall and… Hockey was his big sport.

LUCAS: That's right. Yeah, he was a really good hockey player. Did you come back because—like, where do you think that your motivation to come to reunions sort of like comes from? Do you think it's your brother or your family?

SMOYER: It's my brother, yeah. It's to share what he can't share. I always say I'd rather not be there, I'd rather he were there.

LUCAS: So, is it hard to go or is it sort of—because you described a comfort with the Wall, right?

SMOYER: Uh-hum. Uh, it's mixed, it's mixed. It's hard, but then I see these men whose lives went on and they've done some great things or they've just had their normal lives and Billy didn't have it.

LUCAS: That's really… I mean, I know this is really an interview question, but it's really admirable. I think it's really admirable that you come back to the reunions, like on his behalf. And do you feel like when you leave, that something's been fulfilled a little bit?

SMOYER: What was that? I didn't catch it. At the reunion, what?

LUCAS: When you go to the reunions, and then after you've been at them, because they're a few days, right, at least?

SMOYER: Right.

LUCAS: Do you feel like a good—do you feel, like how do you feel after having gone to the reunions? Because like being here, like you just said, is a mixed bag of feelings.

SMOYER: That's still a mixed bag. It's still a mixed bag. Yeah, I mean, you know, it's the same feelings. I like being with Billy's friends, but he's not there. The thing that's really nice is I just love Dartmouth. The campus is so beautiful and they do such a wonderful job of taking care of you at those reunions. Everything is so well handled and it's just really nice. So, it's… Yeah, you'll enjoy your reunions.

LUCAS: Yeah. No, I hope that I will. Is there anything else you want to talk to relating to Dartmouth or to really anything that we've talked about? I really appreciate you talking about that especially, the reunions. I know that can be difficult to put into words.

SMOYER: Yeah, it's hard. It is. No, I don't have anything else to say.

[End of Interview.]