

## Gene Gillett: Transcription

[00:00:00] **Dean Wetzel:** Alright, Gene, I want to start off by saying thank you for your time today and being willing to sit down with us and talk to us about your service over there in Vietnam. Um, we'll start off with some just very basic information about you and your family and stuff. So, starting off with just, where were you born?

**Gene Gillett:** I was born here in Battle Creek, Michigan.

**Dean Wetzel:** And when was that?

**Gene Gillett:** September 3rd, 1947.

**Dean Wetzel:** Who were your parents and what did they do for a living?

**Gene Gillett:** Well, both my parents are passed, but, uh, I don't really know my real father. My stepfather was just a factory worker and he's passed. And my mother was a clerk in an insurance company downtown (Battle Creek) and she's passed. So, that's about all I know of those two. It's been quite a while since they've been alive.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did you have any siblings?

**Gene Gillett:** Yes, I have three (Correction he has four siblings). Uh, an older sister that's, uh, ten years older than I am (have) and a brother nine years older, and they're both passed. And I have two other brothers that are twins, and they're a year older than I am.

**Dean Wetzel:** Thank you for that. Uh, now, of all those family members, do you know of any of them having military service?

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**Gene Gillett:** Uh, the oldest brother that's passed was in the Navy, and then the other older brother, that's the twin, he, served in Vietnam. In the Marine Corps.

**Dean Wetzel:** Uh, and now do you have any um, college experience at all?

**Gene Gillett:** Yes, I have about a year and a half of Kellogg Community College. I was there about six months and then I got drafted and I came back to school part time and realized I needed some money, you know, I had to get a job, so I never completed uh, my associate's degree. And I was kind of a self-taught engineer now. Working so many years in the engineering department.

**Dean Wetzel:** Awesome. That seems like a difficult field to be self-taught in.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah. But, you know, I had a little bit in high school. And, uh, but then my wife and I started a business. She started the business and then when I got laid off at Clark Equipment, she hired me, and we were in business together for about 35 years. Uh, doing, uh, offset printing and warehouse and distribution and packaging design because of my background. Concept packaging for Kellogg Company. So, I've kind of done a variety of things.

**Dean Wetzel:** Wow, that's, that's, wow. Yeah. Yeah, the packaging, when it comes to marketing, people don't realize.

**Gene Gillett:** No, no, there's a lot of work. Work going into those, designing the stuff.

**Dean Wetzel:** um, so before you talked, you were in, um, Kellogg Community College before you were drafted. Uh, were you, did you have any kind of jobs that you were working before you were drafted?

**Gene Gillett:** Uh, just delivering office supplies for a small office supply company in downtown Battle Creek, did that for maybe six months. And then, uh, I got my (Draft) letter.

**Dean Wetzel:** When were you, uh, drafted?

**Gene Gillett:** Uh, it would be, uh, 67 (1967). Probably around September 67.

**Dean Wetzel:** Uh, did you have a choice to which branch? How did, how did that go? Tell me how, I've obviously never been. drafted,

**Gene Gillett:** So, I just got a letter that said report, and I reported, and then they loaded us up on a bus and took us to Fort Knox, Kentucky. So that would be Army. Uh, I think if you, if you requested to go in like the Marines or something, they would, uh, give you a little extension before you had to report. That's what my brother did. And uh, he wanted to go in the Marines 'cause he got like a 30-day extension before he had to show up. Me, I just took, the Army head to Kentucky with about almost 15 guys I actually knew from town here. All loaded up and went down there.

**Dean Wetzel:** I'm, sure knowing some of the guys that you were at least going to be in basic with helped the transition. Because that can be a pretty violent

transition. I'm sure being drafted, going out of nowhere to now you're in the military.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, and not knowing anybody. So it did help, you know. I had a few friends.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, So, well, let's just get right into it. What was basic like then? Obviously, uh,

**Gene Gillett:** Uh, actually, I didn't think basic was that hard, uh, I mean, difficult to get used to. It was just, you know, getting up early in the morning and running a mile for breakfast, you know. I wasn't used to that, but, uh, I adapted quite well to the basic training. And after that was, after we got out of basic, I volunteered for the leader preparation course before I went to AIT, which trained me to be a squad leader. So, when I went into AIT, which was a tank unit, we learned how to operate tanks. And then I got my orders to stay there at Fort Knox in the armor school, where we scheduled and taught officers from West Point how to operate tanks. And then I got orders to stay there. So, I did that probably about four months or so, and then, then I got orders to go to Vietnam.

**Dean Wetzel:** And uh, what was exactly your MOS, do you remember?

**Gene Gillett:** 81 E 20, which was Illustrator.

**Dean Wetzel:** Illustrator, yeah. So how does an illustrator get into Armor school? , I have no idea. That's the first question I have listening to this is uh, I was just wondering how that one all transpired.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, I don't know. Maybe because of the, you know, a little bit of art background and engineering background, but how it ended up in tanks, I don't know. I couldn't tell you.

**Dean Wetzel:** Okay. Alright. Um, so you, obviously you passed that school, you completed that, so after you got done with all your schooling, did you immediately get sent to Vietnam?

**Gene Gillett:** Uh, well after, you know, working in, uh, the armor school for, you know, about 4 months, uh, then I got orders to go there.

**Dean Wetzel:** Okay. Did it tell you what you were gonna do?

**Gene Gillett:** No.

**Dean Wetzel:** So, you didn't, you didn't know if you were gonna stay in the armory side or go back to Illustrated, or maybe there's even a third option going.

**Gene Gillett:** I arrived in, uh, Vietnam, you know, we landed in, uh, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, got off the, off the airplane, and, uh, You know, it's that heat and the smell, you know, it just hits you like a brick wall. And then, uh, I think I realized, you know, this is not a nice place to be, because I could see rows and rows of caskets stacked there on the tarmac. And, uh, that's when I started getting a little nervous. It wasn't so bad flying over there, but once I arrived

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there, you know, I got a little nervous. But they sent me down to Saigon, said here's where you're going to stay, and we'll get back with you. So, I was there like a week with nothing to do and no place to go and then they sent me down to IV Corps to Can Tho in the Delta. That's when I joined the Psyop group.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, wow, yeah, that's, that's a powerful first impression, right? Like here you are, you're here. Young and fresh, obviously not being a military veteran at all, and your first experience is just rows and rows of caskets. I'm sure that was a lasting impact for you. It is.

**Gene Gillett:** I think about it all the time. There's not one day that goes by that I don't think about Vietnam. Yeah. You know, certain smells, certain sounds, you know, just brings back memories. Yeah. And then down in Can Tho, you know, all night long you could hear artillery. You're just kind of wondering, you know, which one's going to hit us. Uh, New Year's Eve, you know, they tried to infiltrate the airstrip down there. That, that was an eye opener. We Jumped out of your bed at one o'clock in the morning, it was pitch black, and run around trying to find your pants and boots and figure out, you know, what's happening. So, luckily survived that. And flying around the C 47s dumping out leaflets over the villages and the U 10s that I mentioned. Like a Piper Cub just going out and scouting, I guess that's what we did. We didn't run a tape recorder or any loud speakers. We just went out and looked. You know, avoid being shot down. That was my priority.

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**Dean Wetzel:** And I would say that's a just priority there. Yeah,

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, all right, so you mentioned, uh, PSYOPs, I think is what you said. Um, could you explain what exactly that was? Are you allowed to explain what that was?

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, it was psychological warfare, you know. Uh, they printed up, uh, propaganda leaflets, uh, trying to talk the Viet Cong, you know, and go back to your families and so forth. So those were printed up, and that's what we threw out of this C-47. Okay. It was the old cargo planes, the DC 8, I think they were called, DC-8 or DC-10s.

**Dean Wetzel:** A slow flying bus?

**[00:10:28] Gene Gillett:** Yep. Yeah, there was a chute in the back of the tail section where we just dumped cases and cases of these leaflets out.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did you feel that was effective?

**Gene Gillett:** You know, I don't know. I couldn't tell because I was up there and, you know, whoever, dug those out of the jungle, whether it was effective or not, but they've been doing it for years.

**Dean Wetzel:** I'm sure that made it a little difficult to do your job as well, not knowing if you were helping. You know, like, here you are dumping leaflets out the back through the jungles that you might be doing something or could be doing nothing at all. You know, that, your own psychological warfare, I guess,

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on yourself, right? Uh, now, did you ever have to interrogate anybody down there?

**Gene Gillett:** No, I didn't have the training to interrogate. Okay. But, you know, after I went up in Saigon and the interrogation center was called CMIC, Combined Military Interrogation Center. And I just went after prisoners. And, uh, that, if I wasn't doing that, you know, whatever information they got from the prisoner, uh, sketched out. We kind of had to make it nice and even and finalize it so it was legible. And then that information was sent off to someone else, which I don't know who it was. But I'd go after the prisoners and deliver them to interrogator. And then when they were done, they sent me out there to get them and take them back and lock them up.

**Dean Wetzel:** I'm still trying to trace the MOS path. It's Illustrator, Armor, PsyOps, (*and combined military interrogation center*) it's Info Wow, you had a career.

**Gene Gillett:** Oh yeah, maybe had to do it before. In the leaflets, uh huh, print those up, and then, uh, interrogations, you know, making their sketches a little neater, so, I don't know, but never really utilized that illustration ability.

**Dean Wetzel:** Just, uh, just a placeholder, essentially, for the military, huh? Wow. Um, now, uh, Obviously the leaflets that you were writing up in there, in that, um, were in Vietnamese, correct?

**Gene Gillett:** Mm hmm.



**Dean Wetzel:** I, I would think it'd defeat the purpose if they were in English.

Uh, so do you speak Vietnamese?

**Gene Gillett:** No. Just a few words, and I don't even know, don't even remember that, and I wasn't fluent in Vietnamese.

**Dean Wetzel:** Okay. So, you just simply had the task of just dispersing.

**Gene Gillett:** Yep.

**Dean Wetzel:** Well, let's talk a little bit about Tet. I think this is a big one that we want talk about here. So obviously that was the, uh, January or the new year, lunar new year for them. Mm-Hmm. that, that this happened. Where exactly in country were you when Tet went on?

**Gene Gillett:** I was, uh, well, it had been in Can Tho down the south. Uh, because of that night that they, they caught, uh, a lot of VC coming in on Trucks, uh, Deuce-N-A-Half, uh, in the air strip there, and they were headed off by our people. Luckily, they didn't get any farther. That was, that was quite a night that, that night, you know, a lot, a lot of noise activity. And just kind hunker down there in our bunker just kind of prayed that nothing was gonna land in there. And one day, I was standing, uh, with two other guys outside of our compound and the kid went by. With a satchel charge and threw that at us, and luckily two of us had just turned and walked away, and probably three seconds later that satchel charge went off and hit the third guy that was with us,

but he survived. So, it was kind of an eye-opener, you know, that's probably one of the scariest moments that I can remember.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did it alarm you that they were using kids?

**Gene Gillett:** Oh yeah. They use kids for everything. Put acid in coke bottles and put the caps back on and, you know, offer it to a GI. There's a lot of things going on.

**Dean Wetzel:** And again, thank you for that. Did you ever experience patrolling in Vietnam?

**Gene Gillett:** Oh, I was on guard duty. You know, that jungle at night. You know, you don't have street lights like you have around here. I mean, it is dark and you can barely see your hand in front of your face. Uh, so you don't know what's out there, how close it's getting. Uh, but that was, that was interesting being on the guard duty. You know, I wasn't trained for that either. But it's just like a duty that, that needed somebody, so. Gillett, we need you on guard duty tonight, so.

**Dean Wetzel:** The needs of the army, huh? So, and obviously, I'm sure during Tet, you held multiple guard post duties. Um, walk us through a little bit of like, just the mindset that you would have to put yourself in to do that. Obviously, you witnessed the intrusion. Obviously, like you said, they made it to the airfield. You had seen this large force of, you know, Viet Cong make it very deep, do multiple attacks across. I know the American government paints it as

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Tet was largely a failure in the sense of the Vietnam and it was in the terms of military targets. Um, but that, I feel like there's psychological damage that was done there that's where really the win of Tet was for the Vietnam, Vietnamese. Um, for you going out on post, were you ever worried every night that this could be another Tet night? That tonight might be another night that they could do something like that?

**[00:16:55] Gene Gillett:** Oh yeah, I always looked over my shoulder, you know. Even today, um, I can't sit in a restaurant or whatever with my back to the door because I got to be able to see what's coming in loud noises unexpected for the July is not my favorite holiday unexpected noises, and then you know certain smells and so forth. Yeah, it's quite an eye opener going on guard duty. Not knowing whether you're gonna make it back or not, you know, like we hear artillery fire all night long and you just wonder if one of those rounds are gonna come into your compound.

**Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, and it probably doesn't help too because I'm sure the infantry wasn't too far away from you. No. So I'm sure you guys heard or saw the damage of what it was like to be out there and out there and engaging with the enemy. Yeah. And that and I'm sure that was in. Yeah. a fear back in the rear like

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, even the civilians, you know, the vietnamese civilians. You don't know whether they're a friend or foe I've heard a lot of stories, you know,

your barber cut your hair during the day and try to cut your throat at night, you know, because he was on the wrong side.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um And I guess a little bit of a another family question. I should have asked a little bit earlier How did your family feel when you were drafted into the service?

**Gene Gillett:** You know, I don't know. My brothers were out of state. They were up in Minnesota at college. When I left. I think the relationship with my stepfather, it was a pretty good relationship. But at that time he had married another woman because my mother had passed. So, I think it bothered my father, but not her. She had her own children that she was concerned about. She wasn't, we weren't her favorites.

**Dean Wetzel:** So really it was just like your brothers, is really what it came down to.

**Gene Gillett:** And my sister, you know, she was still alive then, but didn't communicate much back and forth.

**Dean Wetzel:** It's, uh, it's always interesting to, to paint out the family history of a veteran. You know, some, some have all lengthy lists, and some are just a spur of the moment. I just got, my number was called.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah. You know, I had no girlfriends, so there was, I had no girl to write home or receive letters from. Yeah. No, packages of cookies and stuff like that.

**Dean Wetzel:** I'm sure that had to hurt morale. When I was deployed, that was like the one nice thing, mail call. Everybody was looking forward to mail call. It sounds like in your case, that would have been the one thing you didn't care about at all, was mail call.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, I just got used to it, you know, not receiving anything. Even like holidays today, you know, I miss so many of them. That is just, uh, you know, it doesn't bother me.

**Dean Wetzel:** Were you upkept then on the news? A lot of people, obviously, once you get over there to Vietnam, you get little pieces of information or whatnot, but it's not like you have NBC at your own TV or whatnot at night. Uh, so did you keep up on current events, or were you pretty isolated to just what was happening in your particular area of Vietnam?

**Gene Gillett:** No, I didn't hear of anything, you know, back in the States. You know, we had the Stars and Stripes, uh, that I remember reading that, you know, a couple times. That's when I found out that one of my, good friends in basic training was killed. That's when I found that out. He was listed in there. But as far as what's going on in the States, I had no idea. Not until I got, when I started hearing stories about all the riots and the picketing and stuff like that.

**Dean Wetzel:** We'll get into that here in just a, a little bit. Um, so your, let's go to your interrogation unit. This is something I have no, I'll admit I have no knowledge on. I would have initially thought this would have been military

police that would have been doing this kind of work. So could you just explain to us what was an interrogation unit? What was it that you did for them as well?

**Gene Gillett:** Well, uh, you know, like, like I said, you know, I'd be sent off, uh, you know, you got to go here to this cell and get this prisoner and walk across the courtyard, um, take him to the room where he was interrogated and then go get him and take him to the cell. But one incident, I had to drive across Saigon with an uncovered jeep to pick up a Viet Cong officer. And I got there to pick him up and they had him locked up in a wooden room. When I got there, the door was singed and I said, what in the world went on here? Well, we tried to. Uh, fill the Coleman Lantern while it was still burning and tipped it over. Well, they caught the door on fire and inside that, behind that door was a, uh, an Officer of the Viet Cong. So, when I went after him with, you know, handcuffs and a gunny sack to put over his head, to put him in that jeep, uncovered jeep, and drive across Saigon, you know, he'd kind of come unglued. He didn't know what was gonna, what was in store for him after. He's trying to burn to death. And so I got him across Saigon, but every time we stopped, you know, the Vietnamese would run up and want to know if he's a Viet Cong. Because it's an uncovered jeep, you know, you can't hide him. And I just had to talk my way through it and keep going until we got him back to our compound and locked it in. Whatever happened to him after that I do not know.

**Dean Wetzel:** I don't think it could have been much worse than having your door caught on fire, or gunny sack, and dragged through the street, like, wow. Yeah, I'm sure, that's one way to make people talk. Um, now, did you, was it always male prisoners that you worked with, or did you ever have to deal with females?

**Gene Gillett:** They had some females, but I never dealt with them. I never had to go after them. I think they had one female officer. But I did not have to go after her. Take them to the interrogation.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did you have any special rules or anything like that that was laid out for your treatment of a prisoner?

**Gene Gillett:** We couldn't manhandle them. I mean, they got manhandled out in the jungle. You hear a lot of horror stories there, but no, we had to treat them like humans. And they were, they were pretty easy to get along with. You just kind of had to keep looking over your shoulder. You know, they give you this little smile. But you know, it's like, you know, your day's coming or, you know, I'm gonna get back at you or whatever. It's like they're looking right through you.

**Dean Wetzel:** I only had to deal with, uh, prisoners in Camp Pendleton. Mm. So they were American prisoners. So, it it, did you ever have to put like body armor on them when you took them out and transported 'em or anything?

**Gene Gillett:** No, You know, actually it was, it was a large courtyard with, you know, rooms all the way around and, you know, chairs.

**Dean Wetzel:** Same compound? Okay. That makes sense then. Yeah. Yeah, because that was always, uh, they always told us if you take prisoners, there's a whole list of stuff that you have to do to keep them safe and protected, but obviously if you're moving them on the same compound, you get away with a lot of stuff. Um, Now, one, one, uh, one area I do want to talk about with these oral histories that I've been doing is the use of Agent Orange. And I know, Directly, it doesn't sound like you might have had any use for Agent Orange, but do you know of if you worked in any area that used to store Agent Orange or possibly was cleaned out with the use of Agent Orange?

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, down in Can Tho, it was at the airstrip because I remember seeing barrels of this stuff. And then, uh, if you look at a map where it was sprayed, both locations I was in, you know, Can Tho and Saigon, it was sprayed all over. In which, I have cancer from Agent Orange. Cause it was, it was just in the air, you know, so I was exposed to it. So, I have a cancer.

**Dean Wetzel:** Does that make you angry?

**Gene Gillett:** No, luckily, it's not a real progressive cancer. So, you know, I'm just with the doctors and just keep an eye on it, but not angry. Actually I'm really not angry about being over in Vietnam. That's kind of not their fault, fault



that that they were at war, we were just over there trying to help. They're victims of circumstance. I call it all.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, well, I was gonna ask this a little bit later, but I'll ask it now.

Do you feel like you, you were successful then in Vietnam?

**Gene Gillett:** No, I don't think so. It wasn't a victory. I mean, a lot of guys, you know, they don't even know why they were there. What are we doing here? So, you know if you don't know why you're there, it's not a victory.

**Dean Wetzel:** Do you think the American government could have done better for, by its military service members by leading them better?

**Gene Gillett:** Probably, I always say, you know, we're trying to be a big brother to every, you know, every country. You can't do that. That doesn't work, so. And if you're going to do it, you better do it right. You know, get in there and take care of business and get out. And we didn't.

**Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, that's what a lot of my veterans keep saying is that was the issue with Vietnam was. We tried to fight it, as they said, with their hand tied behind their back. So, that's something I, you know, I always like to ask that question. Do you feel successful with your service? Um, alright, well, what about luck? Do you believe in luck at all, Gene?

**Gene Gillett:** Uh, yeah.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did you, do you think that's what maybe got you through Vietnam, was luck?

**Gene Gillett:** I think so, because I constantly, you know, I feel guilty. That I came back in one piece and alive. A lot of guys didn't. I'd say I'm lucky.

**Dean Wetzel:** At least physically in one piece. I think that's the untold story with Vietnam. There's a lot of, you know, mental damage and a mental healing that was never allowed to happen. You know.

**Gene Gillett:** One person says, why don't you just get over it? Well, you know, that's something you don't get over. You'll never forget it. Yeah, well, there

**Dean Wetzel:** How do you get over seeing rows upon rows of caskets on the side of a airstrip the very first day you land in country?

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, I've seen victims of napalm, which is not a pretty sight.

**Dean Wetzel:** I can't imagine.

**Gene Gillett:** You don't forget that stuff.

**Dean Wetzel:** Or the smell. I was there when Benghazi, and I remember the human flesh and that smell. That's, that's a very distinct, I don't think I could get over that.

**Gene Gillett:** no. It's like, you know, when I was remodeling the house, I'd go to take stuff from the dump. As soon as you get close to the dump, you know, that smell, you know, kind of brings back memories real quick.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, well, seeing how you live here in Battle Creek, you were saying you're not too far from actually this location where we're doing the oral history. Um, when Fort Custer goes live, does that ever startle you at all? Oh,

**Gene Gillett:** When the guys come in for the weekend?

**Dean Wetzel:** Doing the training and stuff like that?

[00:29:45] **Gene Gillett:** No, I can hear them. Uh, but you know, it doesn't bother me because I know it's going to come. It's coming. It's like 4th of July, you know, I know it's going to happen. But, uh, like my brother that was in the Marines over there, we kind of both just go to bed, you know, and try to fall asleep and we don't have to listen to it. Or we'll call each other and say, incoming, you know. But he had it worse than I did, a lot worse, so.

**Dean Wetzel:** Okay. What was it that he did?

**Gene Gillett:** Uh, he was um, in a howitzer unit, but he also drove an Ammo truck. So, he was up north. So, yeah, he's, he's seen a lot, and we've never talked about it. Actually, anybody, all my friends that were in Vietnam, we've never sat down and talked about it. Because, you know, we just want to forget. And, uh, there's a couple people I know that constantly talk about it, want, want everybody to know. And I says, well, you know, I, I don't think maybe they really had a bad over there. They just want you to feel like they did, so. It's nothing to brag about.

**Dean Wetzel:** It's, um, well, I appreciate you sitting down and talking today with me because, uh, this is what, eventually I want to be able to tell the story that this allows us to tell history from the bottom up. So being able to hear these stories and be able to, to witness history through your eyes as you saw it is, is

incredibly useful in history in general. Um, Did you ever lean on your brother during, like, maybe when you came back after Vietnam because he was another veteran so you knew, like, I could talk to him, he will understand versus the civilians? Like, there was a disconnect?

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, he knew exactly what I was saying, and I knew exactly what he was saying, but you know, like, someone that wasn't there, they don't understand. Like I said, you know, they said, why don't you just get over it? You don't have to be there very long and still have memories that you can't get rid of.

**Dean Wetzel:** You say that was probably the biggest difference, uh, when you came back? Was that you, you were basically isolated? Civilians just didn't get it and you were kind of left over here? Especially because your mom had passed, your dad had, your stepdad had moved on, your brothers were isolated, so you were kind of alone.

**Gene Gillett:** Yep. And I was, I was kind of quiet, you know. I didn't like being around crowds. And, uh, a real sociable, you know, I have calmed down now but um I just had my memories.

**Dean Wetzel:** So, did you stay in Vietnam until your service was up?

**Gene Gillett:** Yes.

**Dean Wetzel:** Okay. So, your service was over and then you got shipped all the way back to Battle Creek.

**Gene Gillett:** Yep. Well, I got sent to, uh, Fort ORD, California.

**Dean Wetzel:** Fort Oregon. What'd you do there?

**Gene Gillett:** Spent two nights on a bleachers bench, and then got processed out of the, out of the army.

**Dean Wetzel:** Thank you for your service.

**Gene Gillett:** And then I flew down to San Diego to visit my sister for a couple days and then, uh, flew home to Detroit. And then my brother picked me up because at that time I my father's other wife, she didn't want to drive to Detroit to get me.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, did you experience, because this would have been what, 69 you got back? Yeah. Uh, that was right when there was a lot of political pushback, a lot of rioting, protesting about the war. Did you experience any of that?

**Gene Gillett:** No, you know, I can't remember any, you know, experiences like that. Because when I got back, I kind of kept to myself and, you know, really didn't do much. Even the airports, I don't remember seeing any stuff like that.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did you advertise being a veteran? Were you, were you proud to be a veteran?

**Gene Gillett:** I was proud, but I didn't start wearing, you know, a Vietnam hat until maybe a year ago. Uh, I just figured there's no sense of advertising, but, uh, my wife's from a military family. Her father was a Senior Master Sergeant

(Air Force) serving in World War II, Vietnam, and Korea. So she's quite patriotic, and she wanted, always wants me to wear a hat or this shirt. Or go to programs where they are honoring the military. I just started wearing my hat probably a year or two years ago. Some people were so against it, you know, I don't want to cause any trouble, any problem. I just keep the experience to myself.

**Dean Wetzel:** You think if the American people would have been more accepting of Vietnam, you might have been more willing to display your service sooner?

**Gene Gillett:** Which, uh, I just, I get chills, you know. When people come home from Iraq, you know, and we're having parades and so forth. Well, I think that's, that's just wonderful. And lately, you know, I've had a lot of people thank me for my service when they see me wearing my hat. So, it's like I'm catching up. But I do really appreciate these people. And they're young, young people too. Uh, some of them don't even know what Vietnam was. I made a comment to a waitress in a restaurant because on a ketchup bottle. So much is being donated, uh, from the purchase of this ketchup. And I told the waitress, I said, well that's nice. She says, oh, I don't even know what Vietnam is. So, the young people really don't know.

**Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, it's a, it doesn't usually hold much space in that history textbook. You know, because from the top-down perspective, America lost, so

why is it going to drown on something that sees itself as a loss? No, I, personally don't think Vietnam was, uh, was a loss, at least from the veterans because you made it home, right? You did your job. You succeeded and you followed through with what you said you would do for your country. It leaves these gaps where people are like, oh, I, I didn't know the that about Vietnam. Yeah. Um, you know, there's so much that goes on in this particular war that it just gets glossed over. You know? So, I know, uh, Vietnam infantry units, they talk a lot about, like, not making friends just because, like, people, you just don't know how long someone's gonna last or be around. Your particular case, it sounds like you were, uh, a little bit more behind the wire, a little bit more security, not necessarily so much out there in the, in the, the thick of things. Uh, so did you make friends while you were over there at all?

**Gene Gillett:** No, I did, but I can't remember any of the guys names. I mean I can visually see their faces, but, uh, I didn't make a lot of friends either, because, uh, some of the duties I had, you know, I wasn't even around them, you know. I might have been with one guy, or nobody, so. And I know some guys, you know, they were right home and had reunions with their buddies, and I don't remember mine.

**Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, it was, uh, kind of kept your nose to the grind and were looking at the, just, just surviving and getting to the next day mentality. Which there's nothing wrong with that at all either. Um, So, you get back from

Vietnam, um, were you aware of any VA benefits that were offered to you? Did they give you any classes? Any type of schooling?

**Gene Gillett:** No. I just enrolled in the VA here probably three years ago. My brother-in-law kept telling me that, you know, I should, he was, he got a medical discharge from the military (Army). And uh, he worked with a lot of patients that, you know, he said, I should sign up with the VA. You know, that's just the importance of love. You know, those guys out there, worse off than me, you know, let them have the service and the money. But then I find, I'm happy with the VA. You know, you hear a lot of horror stories, but, well, I've been treated very well here in Battle Creek and the VA in Ann Arbor.

[00:38:55] **Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, this, I love the VA here. It's a very beautiful campus too.

**Gene Gillett:** It is, yeah.

**Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, that um, did you ever get to use like your GI Bill or anything like that?

**Gene Gillett:** Nope. Nope. Uh Which I should have. Yeah. I was a little restless when I got home. You know, I just had to get a job and work, you know, did not have time to go back to school.

**Dean Wetzel:** Did you feel like you lost two years of your life by going over to Vietnam and being drafted? And that you were just trying to like make up for lost time when you got back?



**Gene Gillett:** Yeah. Cause I'm like, you know, I had no idea what was going on in the States there for the year I was gone. So, you know, I was kind of like trying to catch up. When I came home, you know, I grew a beard and long hair just so I'd fit in.

**Dean Wetzel:** Meet everybody else, you know.

**Gene Gillett:** Hey, that guy's got short hair. I bet he was

**Dean Wetzel:** in the military, yeah. So I had to grow long hair. Yeah, it was, it's one thing I didn't realize and my wife points it out to me. Yeah. Uh, we have a certain way we walk, a certain way we talk, a certain way we act. We can just pick each other out of a room. You can instantly, like that, the haircut, immediately you can just tell. So, uh, now, again, I know you didn't do a full four years or even more, uh, two years is all you did in the service, but do you feel that that changed you as a person?

**Gene Gillett:** Oh yeah.

**Dean Wetzel:** Uh, and then how so?

**Gene Gillett:** I think I grew up a lot more responsibility, uh, being more responsible. And I really think everybody should go in the military for at least two years, like maybe right out of high school. You, you learn a lot. You realize a little hard work's not going to kill you. Yeah, so, you know, I had no regrets, I learned a lot.

**Dean Wetzel:** The pressure of standing guard and be something bigger than yourself. Right. Something that you have to experience that in order to appreciate that, I would agree. I think you've touched on this a little bit, and I don't want to get into, I'm not a medical doctor or anything like that, but do you think your service, what you experience, the trauma that you experience, uh, the heartaches, all of the stuff that goes into that? Changed how you interact or you react with people? I know you mentioned you don't sit with your back towards a door, you don't trust anybody. Uh, so do you chalk that up as being, yeah, that's Vietnam, that's my military service. Not saying that you've necessarily faulted or anything like that, but you've noticed like, I've changed because of this.

[00:42:05] **Gene Gillett:** Yeah, I used to be quiet before the military. Come out of my shell quite a bit.

**Dean Wetzel:** Then you feel like, uh, can you elaborate what it is that makes you not want to trust people in a sense? Is it just because you, you heard the stories of like infiltrators and impossible, you know, the Tet Offensive and things like that and you just like, you just don't know and that just uncertainty is what's led you to just, I would rather just close off?

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah. Well, you know, the unknown, what's behind you, you know, uh, so I just sit where I can view everything and then you know like trusting somebody you know I want to know the whole truth you know I don't want anything hidden no surprises.

**Dean Wetzel:** cut and dry yeah straight to the point played mentality

**Gene Gillett:** I don't have time for you know like yeah

**Dean Wetzel:** you see that with a lot of veterans I think we're all in a sense uh I think we all get tired of the hurry up and wait game that we spend in the military so Look, I don't want to waste a half hour. Let's just tell me what you need and let's get to it, type thing. Yeah, it's definitely, I've noticed it with myself too. You're not the only one with this. I've, being in college, I have been very blunt in a few times and where people have had to tell me I've had to rein back my bluntness. They need a little bit more fluff with what I say. They can't be so direct.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah, or like you get in a line, you have to wait, and people bitch them up. God. Is this line ever going to move? Hey, join the military. You'll get used to how to cope with it.

**Dean Wetzel:** Well, at least we're not standing in the sun. That's right. At least we're not on fire. You'll learn to look for the bright side of things. So, after going to a war zone, um, and again, I think you've touched on this a little bit, but has your opinion or your feelings about war changed? Um, for example, war. Uh, you know, some people are like, you know, gung ho for war. I've heard some people quickly be like, well, just nuke them, get rid of them. You know, you'll hear say statements like that. And it draws alarm to me where I immediately perk up and I'm like, you must've never have served. You have no

idea what it means to even say those words or what that could actually mean in a situation. Um, and I, I do feel that it's changed me in some ways. So, if you, do you have situations similar to that where you're like, you know, I do think now. After going to Vietnam, witnessing war, seeing the coffins on the, on the tarmac, and hearing the horror stories and the explosions, I do have a different opinion about warfare.

**Gene Gillett:** I, uh, I think there's a better way to solve problems, uh, because there's too many innocent people getting hurt because of the decisions certain people make. Uh, war would be the last thing, especially nowadays with the new nuclear capabilities. I mean, nobody's gonna win. No. No, there'll be no winners in this game.

**Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, that's that. Mutual destruction. That's out there, you know. Um, yeah, and I think the same thing when you look at other conflicts that are currently going on in today's world. It's not a the cut, the easier solution is keeping the talks at the table. Keeping the talks open. It's not, it's not gonna be solved at the end of a gun.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah.

**Dean Wetzel:** Um, so, what was one thing you would say from your time over there, which, you know, a year, correct? About a year?

**Gene Gillett:** Yes

**Dean Wetzel:** In your year that you were over there, uh, that stands out, that just is gonna be the one, when you think of Vietnam, that's the image that pops in your head, from over there.

**Gene Gillett:** What was the question?

**Dean Wetzel:** So like, when you, when someone brings up Vietnam, or talks about Vietnam, immediately you think of? A particular moment, it could be a briefing, it could be a, uh, it could be the coffins again, it could be something like that from Vietnam, that just, just the mention of the word Vietnam is enough to trigger it for you, that has that big of an impact. Cause I know you talked also about smells and things like that too.

**Gene Gillett:** probably maybe a senseless death. Yeah. Cause there was a lot of just, some people getting in the line of fire, you know, shouldn't have been there.

**Dean Wetzel:** Makes it, makes it a little difficult.

**Gene Gillett:** Yeah.

[00:46:51] **Dean Wetzel:** Um, so, I personally think veterans today are very treated, treated very well. We're very blessed. Uh, this is obviously the work of you guys, Vietnam veterans who had a horrendous experience, both physically and mentally. Returning to this country and uh, trying to get aid from its, its government in that, um, How do you feel today's veterans are treated? And

again, I know you talked a little bit about the parades, but in general, the, the veterans in, in general, how do you feel that they're served?

**Gene Gillett:** Well, I think the ones sleeping on the street aren't being taken care of very well, and they're, they're putting other people ahead of them that didn't serve their country. Uh, these are guys that, you know, gave their lives up for two, three, four, many years and now they're sleeping on the streets because the government isn't recognizing contribution to this country. Uh, I think they're being taken some, they're, they're making, they're making progress, you know, the government with these veterans. But some of them are so mentally disabled now that, uh, They're just so used to the conditions that they're in, and living conditions, that I don't think they even want to be helped. Because they're comfortable the way that they've made themselves, but there's a lot of work, a lot of work ahead of the government to take care of these guys.

[00:48:34] **Dean Wetzel:** Yeah, I, I agree. There's homeless veterans. It's a hard one to see, you know, especially here in Michigan alone. Look at all these abandoned buildings that we have. We could, I mean, it doesn't have to be perfect. I mean, they've slept in foxholes, you know, so I mean, something with just a non-leaky roof over their head would be tremendous. And a step in the right direction, I think we could do a lot to, to help them more in that, in that regard. Yeah. Um, so as, as, as we come to a, uh, kind of a close here with your oral history, Gene, uh, is there anything in particular that you would like to add

more to your, to this? Anything you, that we didn't necessarily talk about or explain or?

**Gene Gillett:** No, I appreciate what you're doing to bring this out in the open and archive this, this material so that our generation coming up can understand, you know. What, uh, Vietnam veterans went through, Korean veterans, you know, all the military veterans. Uh, cause it's not being told very well. Yeah, I think what you're doing is marvelous.

**Dean Wetzel:** Well, I, I thank you for that. I, I do, I really do think there's something to be said with just going and asking the people that were there what they saw instead of going, well, what do I think happened? We have the, you guys are still here that were there, you know. It's one thing if. Okay. The American revolution, we don't have those veterans anymore. Right. So, we were kind of left with whatever's left in the historical archives and then making an educated assumption to that. But right now we have a way of being able to tell a much more complete picture of history. If we just simply come out here and talk to you guys, especially, and you talked about it a little bit ago about how you guys don't want to talk about your service. And that's because I think a lot of it is. Uh, you guys were told that your service wasn't warranted, or wasn't important, or doesn't matter. Which is probably the biggest one, and this is a way for me to at least say back to you guys. It did matter. It does matter a lot. And there's a lot of us that want to know a much truer and much more honest

Interviewee: Michael Gene Gillett  
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Interviewer: Dean Wetzel  
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opinion of what was it like over there, you know. It wasn't, uh, it wasn't, uh, the, uh, what is that, the full metal jacket type experience where you're in Hanoi City and there's just snipers in the buildings and rebels and they Or the Forrest Gump and you're walking through neck deep waters. Like there, there's more to Vietnam. There's a lot more of stuff going on than that. So, I appreciate you sitting down with me today and talking to me about this. Um, as we come to a close, my last question I have for you is, um, what is one thing that you wish people knew about the veteran community as a whole? More.

**Gene Gillett:** that we're human. You know, we're not animals like the, uh, they're called, we're called baby killers. Well, I don't think that's quite true, but I don't know where they ever got that, you know? Uh, but, you know, we're, we're human just like anybody else. You know, we, we did what we were told to do. We took an oath, you know, to the government, to our country, and we did, we did what we were told to do.

**Dean Wetzel:** So, reminding everybody we're human. That's a good one. So, well thank you, uh, for your time and, uh, I'll be talking with you. Cool. Nice stuff. Good stuff.