

# A soldier in Vietnam

## Interview

Steve Cherkoss

Bruce Whitten, age 26, held the rank of Staff Sergeant in the Air Force until he received a general discharge on May 23, 1965. Whitten was assigned to the first Air Commando group spending two years in Vietnam. Whitten gave the interview despite his awareness that he might be endangering his future. He felt however, that the experiences which he had during his two years in Viet Nam were of unquestionable importance to the American people—especially to men of draft age.

The interview was taped by reporter Steve Cherkoss. When he asked Whitten about using his name, the former Air Commando replied, “If it will help get the message across, go ahead and use it. If I knew the things about Viet Nam that I know now, I would never have gone. If using my name will make guys think more—more about not going and fighting the people over there—then publish my name. If they get me—put me in jail or something, well that’s my responsibility.”

Q. What did you do before you enlisted?

A. Before I went into the Air Force I went to Tulane University. Got out of that, I didn’t know too much what to do, so I went in the service to get my time over. Nothing else to do.

Q. How long did you go to Tulane?

A. Four years.

Q. What did you study?

A. Economics, psychology.

Q. You joined up as an enlisted man?

A. Right.

Q. Did you go to special training for the Air Commandos?

A. Right. I enlisted in the Air Force Commandos because I couldn’t pass the physical for OTS. (Officer Training School.

Q. How do you feel about American people’s taxes being spent in Viet Nam?

A. It’s a waste of money.

Q. You hear a lot about American troops fighting to preserve freedom.

A. (laughter)

Q. Do the men feel that their role is preserving freedom?

A. They’re just trying to stay alive and get out of there, because the north Vietnamese don’t want us and we don’t want to be there.

Q. What was some of the training you went through?

A. Oh, jumping, jungle fighting training, scuba training, survival, cold water and so forth. Hand to hand combat.

Q. What about your encounters with the South Vietnamese people once you actually landed and began fighting?

A. Well, they just couldn't seem to figure out what we were doing there, or why we wanted to come there in the first place. They were doing better before we came—or this was the idea they gave us. “Now you come in here and foul up the war.”

We go out into the jungle, in the little villages, people were trying to figure out what the devil we were doing there, who you are and what you are. They don't know there's a war going on... all they know is there are some people coming out their running through their village, burning it, killing there people, for no obvious reason whatsoever.

Q. Why do the South Vietnamese think Americans are there?

A. They kind of feel that we are trying to take their country over for a bigger empire. They can't figure this out. They say “what do you want to take over this country for, it has nothing.”

Q. Do they want the Americans to stay there?

A. No. The best comparison I heard was when a South Vietnamese guy was explaining. He says in his opinion the Americans were setting up in South Vietnam to show the Soviets that we can do the same thing they were doing in Cuba—we can set up in their own backyard.

Q. Do all the people believe that?

A. No, I think they believe that it's just a bunch of crap, and that we're just trying to increase our size, or get more land or something. The common expression was always “Johnson's Little War” among the troops. Johnson is just pushing for something...for exactly what, we did not know.

Q. Do they want the U.S. troops out?

A. This was about the main idea that I could draw and this would be an opinion on my part. Now what their officials want and what the people want are different things but they don't even have a solid government to count on.

(Continued next issue.)

# fifth Estate

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