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Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Dr. Robert Wilkes
Conducted by Julie Morgan
April 24, 1990

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Julie Morgan: This is Julie Morgan. It is 4:00 p.m., on April 24, 1990. I am
2 interviewing for the first time Dr. Robert Wilkes. This interview is taking place at the
3 office of Dr. Robert Wilkes at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. This is part of
4 the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project at Texas Tech University. Okay, let's start out
5 by you telling me a little bit about your background before going to Vietnam.

6 Robert Wilkes: Let me say it in a fewer number of words. I was in an air
7 commando wing which was part of a Special Air Warfare Center. So our whole unit was
8 involved very heavily in Vietnam. We had a lot of individuals who were sent over there
9 before there was any formal build-up by the United States. So we had a lot of individuals
10 who were over there on temporary duty, multiple temporary duty assignments. It was
11 primarily a counter-insurgency unit so it's quite common (I was in a support group), for
12 us to have over the period of, I guess two or three years before I went over there- fairly
13 common for us to have casualties from people who were killed in Vietnam before there
14 was this 'formal declaration' as it were. So, I was familiar with it because I was in a
15 Special Air Warfare unit well before I went over there and then I got to see it for myself.

16 JM: So what type of training did you have in the United States before going there?

17 RW: Well, I was in a combat support group and so there really wasn't the need for
18 any special training. Unlike people who were in fighting capacities, I didn't have to do
19 that. A combat support unit in the United States works very much like a combat support

1 unit in Vietnam. They provide support for air commando wings and so forth. So, there
2 was really no special training necessary. I didn't have to have any.

3 JM: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

4 RW: I arrived in Vietnam Christmas Day of 1967 and spent that year. Actually, it
5 was less than a year. When I came back from Vietnam I also got out of the Air Force. So
6 they shipped me back about two weeks early in order to process me out of the service.
7 But I arrived Christmas Day.

8 JM: Where were you stationed?

9 RW: I was in Saigon.

10 JM: And what were your duties?

11 RW: Actually it varied over the year. When I was first stationed over there I was
12 in the commando wing, First Air Commando Wing, as executive officer. The second two
13 months that I was over there, I went down to the maintenance squadron and was
14 Administrative Officer for the maintenance squadron. Frankly, I didn't like that so I sort
15 of scattered around to see what other jobs there were. I wound up working in a base
16 command post the last six or seven months on Tan Son Nhut (TSN) Air Base in Saigon.
17 So that was basically what I was doing there.

18 JM: Did you find any problems within this area as far as...I know that you talked
19 before about waste to my husband?

20 RW: Problems you mean with management of the war effort?

21 JM: Right, uh, huh.

22 RW: Well, you have to recognize that Tan Son Nhut was a huge air base so there
23 was a lot of flow through there even though it wasn't destined for Tan Son Nhut Air Base
24 itself and for Saigon itself. Saigon was a port of entry and so a lot of the stuff that would
25 come for Vietnam came into Saigon, but it was sort of a standing joke that if you couldn't
26 find what you wanted in the base exchange, which is the military store, you could go
27 downtown to the streets of Saigon and still get it in military packages. The Vietnamese
28 would have stolen it off the ships or directly off of supply trucks and would be selling it
29 to the GI's or to anybody who wanted to buy and it was still in the official military
30 package. They were very poor people. I don't mean that to excuse their stealing, but they
31 stole. They stole stuff all the time- on-base, off-base. They stole whatever they could.

1 And there was a large contingent of military over there. We had 25,000 U.S. military on
2 Tan Son Nhut and over 25,000 Vietnamese military, each with its own designated areas. I
3 mean there were areas that you would not let the Vietnamese military come into. You just
4 simply kept them out. With that many people there, with that amount of stuff that goes
5 through there, it's inevitable that you lose some of it. But we lost a lot of it. There was a
6 lot of waste.

7 JM: Do you think the government should have policed it more?

8 RW: I think that waste, a certain amount of waste is going to be incurred no
9 matter what level of policing that you have. That's true in companies. I was in there in
10 1967, that's when we had this enormously rapid, huge buildup in 1967 of something like
11 half a million troops over there. It was just this huge buildup. And so, there really was not
12 the policing capability there to do everything we wanted to. I'm not even sure if the
13 people up there really wanted to. In spite of the fact that they were career officers and
14 enlisted men, they supported their country, but the fact is they thought it was sort of a
15 wasted effort, so you didn't have the commitment to maintaining order and maintaining
16 control over supplies and so forth. We used to lose stuff even from the United States.
17 Once, when I was at Hurlburt Field, I was put in charge of doing an investigation for a
18 huge airplane jack. They had lost this jack. An airplane jack stands ten, fifteen feet high
19 and they had lost two of these things. Well, what clearly happened was the jacks had
20 been sent to Vietnam and they just sort of lost accountability. I'm sure the Air Force
21 probably still had it somewhere; they just didn't know where. So you multiply that.
22 Secondly, the Vietnamese had been at this war for twenty or thirty years, a generation
23 had grown up, so there were a lot of Vietnamese who didn't want to have anything to do
24 to support the war. They didn't want to have anything to do with it. They were very
25 poor people. These are people who lived in houses constructed for example of
26 cardboard or of beer cans that had been flattened out and nailed up the side of the
27 house. Poor beyond anything you could imagine. They had grown up with the war, for a
28 lot of them stealing was the way that they lived. They didn't believe in the military. So,
29 would better policing have helped... sure, sure it would have helped but it was clear we
30 weren't going to do it.

31 JM: Did you have very much contact with the Vietnamese?

1 RW: Oh, yeah, everyday. Sure.

2 JM: What were their reactions towards you?

3 RW: You mean civilian, on-base or off-base?

4 JM: Civilian, off-base.

5 RW: Well, Tan Son Nhut remember is a huge base. The only way that base could
6 run successfully was if we hired a lot of Vietnamese civilians to work on the base. They
7 were the ones who did a lot of the service kind of work. They were the people who
8 worked in the BOQs officers' quarter and enlisted quarters. That was the support staff that
9 did things that our military didn't want to do. So they had the dingiest jobs, they had the
10 lowest paying jobs, had the dirtiest jobs, they were the ones to work in the mess halls and
11 so forth. So we had a lot of those on base and for the most part they did the jobs pretty
12 well. The difficulty arose when you started getting involved with Vietnamese who were
13 in some sort of supervisor or more administrative capacity. For example, once they really
14 wanted higher wages and so they came to work one morning and the Vietnamese guards
15 refused to let any Vietnamese workers on base. Maybe it wasn't higher wages. When
16 they wanted a concession from the Americans regarding something on Tan Son Nhut Air
17 Base they would just threaten not to let the Vietnamese workers on the base. You can't
18 afford to paralyze an operation. They were very aggravating to work with, because they
19 were not disciplined. We were used to, particularly in the Air Force to having things in a
20 very disciplined kind of way. And their culture was different. We went over there, like a
21 lot of Americans do, expecting that they abandon their culture and sort of do things our
22 way and it was not going to happen. They had been at this war now for, as I said, twenty
23 or thirty years and they were certainly very weary of Americans. They were weary of
24 Americans because Americans often treated them with disdain, like a nonperson and I
25 saw that. Not all, because we had a lot of people who were concerned, who worked in
26 orphanages and did a lot of this stuff, but a lot of the military resented being over there;
27 they resented the Vietnamese especially when you would go off-base and you would see
28 all these young men who were stealing you blind or selling you stuff that was already
29 yours; they should have been in the military but they're not. You would feel like you
30 were over there with a higher commitment than the Vietnamese were in their own
31 country. There was, understandably, a lot of resentment. It didn't affect me personally to a

1 great deal except that I resented being over there, too, because we had a lot of people who
2 simply weren't being utilized, that weren't in necessary jobs. The Vietnamese were
3 certainly a challenge.

4 JM: What were your feelings about the war while you were over there?

5 RW: In terms of supporting or not supporting it? I was opposed to our
6 intervention on that level before I went over there and would have resented my being
7 over there or certainly many of my friends who were over there. So, I was already
8 opposed to it; I was not a card carrying activist. It's not the kind of thing that you can go
9 there and support very easily. You constantly had this feeling of such enormous waste
10 and there were reports of the Vietnamese soldiers not fighting, not supporting the war. So
11 I was opposed to it before I went over there. The year that I was over there only hastened
12 that view, particularly around Saigon, because there was such a large amount of waste in
13 this large city with large city problems and I grew more opposed to it the whole year that
14 I was over there.

15 JM: Do you feel the same way about the Vietnam war today as you did then?

16 RW: Oh, much stronger. I don't know that it's a war that we should have ever
17 really been in. But I'm convinced that it was probably one of the most politically
18 influenced conflicts that the United States has ever been in. Particularly if you read
19 materials since then, like David Halberstam's [actually means Neil Sheehan] book, *A*
20 *Bright and Shining Lie*. I don't know if you've read that or not about the Vietnam War. It
21 was a war that seemed to be, from my limited perspective, to have been dominated more
22 by political than military objectives. And, in fact, I think frequently the military
23 objectives were deeply overshadowed by the political considerations. *A Bright and*
24 *Shining Lie* is what I was trying to think of. I don't know if you've read that or not.

25 JM: How did you feel about the anti-war protesting before, during and after you
26 served in Vietnam?

27 RW: That's a good question. As I was answering the previous question, I was
28 trying to think of how much I was aware of the anti-war protest. There wasn't a great deal
29 of that until really after my involvement. 1967 was when Johnson really built up the
30 military situation. There was some protest to it but that didn't really occur on the scale
31 that you're talking about really until after I had gotten back. For the most part, I don't

1 think it affected me at all. I don't remember having a great deal of thought about it. But it
2 wasn't as vocal or as publicized or for that matter even as existent at the time that I was
3 over there as it was in the years following, because we began to have these enormous
4 casualties. We had involvement, but the casualties were smaller and so they were
5 isolated. But when you are talking about five, six hundred thousand men then the
6 absolute size of casualties goes up and so we begin to be much more aware plus the
7 enormous cost of it. I couldn't tell you upon reflection, I really couldn't fault the people
8 who were against the war because I think it was highly politically motivated in the first
9 place. I don't agree, I guess fully on how some people went about it but it was such an
10 enormous cost to us for how it ended.

11 JM: What are your feelings about the U. S. involved today with other countries
12 militarily?

13 RW: Well, in what sense? We are involved with Europe, for example, militarily,
14 but in a sense that we provide troops over there. Do you mean, for example, as in South
15 America where there is conflict?

16 JM: Right. Nicaragua or...

17 RW: We would like to think that some lesson was learned about what went on
18 over there (meaning Vietnam). I guess my view of some of the things that have
19 happened in South America are a bit different, because after all they are in this
20 hemisphere. I don't mean to say out of sight out of mind, that's over there, don't worry
21 about it. But it does make a difference, I think if it's closer to home, if there are
22 incursions or there are dangers within your own hemisphere. There is a different kind of
23 oppression I think that occurs in South America than occurred in Vietnam. I can see a
24 more bona fide reason for military action in South America than I could for the military
25 action in South Vietnam, but not to the extent that it becomes up to the United States
26 doing the fighting for countries as happened to us. Supposedly, their country, in many
27 cases, they wouldn't fight. This changed as the years went on but I don't see the parallel
28 in South America at all. South America is the place, I guess where we're most involved.
29 If you are talking about as in Korea, that's an extension of what has been going on over
30 there for years and years and years. You do have at least a semblance of a
31 democratically oriented government in South Korea. But I don't know if that answers

1 your question or not. I think that you have to look at each situation under its own
2 merits. To some degree I guess the United States is sort of policemen for the world.
3 Because, you can't, I think go back to the late 1800's and early 1900's when you had
4 such a restricted involvement, we'll stay here, we sort of won't worry about the rest of
5 the world. I think that's a grandiose philosophy; we're involved geopolitically on a
6 world wide basis whether you want to or not. The chances for being sucked into a
7 conflict with nuclear effects are much scarier than they were of being sucked into a
8 conflict such as the second World War.

9 JM: You talked about a lesson, hoping we learned a lesson. Do you think there
10 was anything positive coming out of being involved in Vietnam?

11 RW: Not that I can see.

12 JM: Was there anything positive for you having served in Vietnam?

13 RW: Personally, no, I hated every minute of it. I thought it was a waste of time . If
14 I had felt I was really contributing something than I would have felt differently. I had a
15 number of people, friends from my base, who were sent over there and who were in
16 places that were certainly much less pleasant then where I was. They were sleeping in
17 tents and they were in more temporary kind of surroundings. I was in an air-conditioned
18 command post, I went to the officers club every day for dinner, and had my own quarters
19 off-base, about three blocks from base. If you're going to spend a year in a war, well
20 that's not a bad way to spend it. I certainly wouldn't say, well, if I would have been
21 fighting and being shot at maybe I would have thought I was contributing, because I
22 would have and it would have scared the hell out of me too. I wouldn't want to be in a
23 position where I could get killed and I did resent it for those people who did get killed
24 and maimed because it was such a waste, I thought. But on the personal level, no I
25 couldn't see that there was anything positive about Vietnam. I resented the whole year
26 because I didn't feel it was necessary. During any kind of situation like that you find ways
27 that you can sort of endure. You do as a wife whose husband is in a doctoral program and
28 sees nothing but a doctoral program and sort of ignores everything else happening to him.
29 So you find ways that you can endure it. And it does change you. It does. You couldn't be
30 involved with it and not have it change you. My office in the command post was directly
31 across the street from the hospital; next to the hospital was the morgue. Virtually

1 everyday I would see the trucks, flatbed trucks taking these coffins from the morgue up to
2 the flight line. And, of course, I don't know if you are familiar with it, but have you ever
3 seen trucks, they never double stack coffins of the deceased. It's just a tremendous breach
4 of protocol. So you never see them double stacked; they are always in single layers as a
5 matter of respect for the dead. I would see these trucks lined up with these rows and rows
6 of coffins. So you're constantly reminded of what happened. Or you would be in the
7 command post and hear the rumbling of the B-52's bombing, say, twenty miles from
8 where you were. Once, I went on a helicopter flight to where two of our planes had
9 crashed -- one was an electronic warfare sort of an airborne command post and an F-4 jet.
10 They had collided in mid-air. Everybody on board was killed; the plane went down
11 before we could get any of our military to the scene, even though it was only about eight
12 or ten miles from the base. Before we could get out to the crash site, the Vietnamese were
13 out there stripping the plane and our own dead on the ground. In fact, to keep them away
14 we set up a helicopter gun ship to strafe the area to keep the Vietnamese from stripping
15 them down. So, clearly it's going to change people. When you fly and you see nothing but
16 bomb holes and bomb craters or when you see people on the streets of Saigon who are
17 missing arms and legs and so forth from the war. It will change you. It doesn't make you
18 support the war any more. You clearly come back a changed person.

19 JM: I just recently interviewed a daughter of a MIA, what do you think has
20 become of the MIA's?

21 RW: The question is whether there are people still over there alive.

22 JM: Do you feel that there are?

23 RW: I wouldn't be surprised to find that there are. I know there's been a lot of
24 sensationalism -- *Rambo* movies, Chuck Norris movies going over there. I wouldn't be
25 surprised if there were some; maybe there's not. Maybe they just haven't found the
26 gravesites. There's a lot of open country. Maybe they're there, maybe they're not. I don't
27 know.

28 JM: Do you think the government has gotten involved enough to find out?

29 RW: Well, we got heavily involved in the war itself and tried to punish North
30 Vietnam and tried to bring them to submission. That didn't work so what would be the
31 involvement now? We've asked them repeatedly and they say no, there are no more over

1 here and then suddenly they produce more human remains. Then no more ... then
2 suddenly they produce more remains. So what would you do? Go in with a major task
3 force and start the war all over again. It's sort of like how do you free the hostages in
4 Lebanon? You say well, you just go ahead and free them. But you don't know where they
5 are. The fact is, we don't know where they are. And so, you can make demands, and
6 demands and demands and eventually you'll either have to back up your demand or
7 retract your demand. And how do you back up your demand? Go over there with a major
8 assault and then what happens? There would be killing in the end. So it's appealing to say
9 the government should get more involved but the reality is I don't know if there is any
10 real hard evidence that these people exist. Even if they do there is not any real hard
11 evidence that they do. So on what basis would you act? What would you do, get an
12 assault force? It was our assault forces that lead us to the Vietnam war to begin with.

13 JM: Tell me a little about what it was like coming home from Vietnam?

14 RW: That's a good question. I assume that you asked this of different people.
15 That's really hard to describe. My survival was the easiest. People who were out being
16 shot, and some didn't survive, had a hard time. I wouldn't in any sense compare my
17 hardship with theirs. They had real hardships. I remember I was sitting at dinner one
18 night when this pilot came in and said, 'Do you eat like this every night?' And of course,
19 I did. For him it was a matter of coming out of the bush and a very hard existence. So
20 those people had it hard; I didn't have it hard. It's hard to be separated from your family
21 because I had a wife and two young children and I lost a year of their lives. But at least I
22 came back with my life and my whole body so I don't mean to claim it as a hardship, but
23 when you are away it is hard. You are away from your family for a year, but you
24 maintain some closeness. We sent some tapes, we never wrote letters. We sent tapes so
25 your children could hear your voice, at least to have some kind of contact. We talked on
26 the telephone. But when you leave, it is almost surrealistic. You take off and you know
27 you are not coming back. Vietnam is such a poor and dirty place. Tan Son Nhut Air Base
28 is about eight or nine miles from Saigon itself. I had access to military vehicles so I could
29 take a jeep down there. But if you rode a bus down there, all the buses had what are called
30 grenade screens. It's sort of like heavy wire that's welded across all the windows. That's
31 to keep Vietnamese terrorists from throwing grenades in the bus. About two months after

1 I was over there, there was an attack on the base. One of the people who was killed was
2 the guy who cut my hair in the officers' barber shop. He was a terrorist. I was very active
3 in the church while I was over there. That was a real strong support group for me. There
4 were self help projects, self help meanings the Air Force or the military assignment
5 provided materials for you. We got the materials and constructed an entire addition to the
6 chapel. Tan Son Nhut has a fig chapel. We put in air-conditioning. There were one star
7 generals out there with colonels, enlisted men and so forth. It was a lot of involvement.
8 Two weeks after I left Vietnam, a mortar hit it and blew it to pieces, blew the whole
9 chapel to pieces. Also being in the command post you hear about things. I remember I
10 went down to the flight line one day and saw this F-105 that had just landed. It was so
11 shot up, I don't see how the pilot landed. But when you leave and you know that you're
12 not going to be part of that, you go back to a real world where you don't have people who
13 are scraping just to survive. When you get back into reality it's sort of like stepping back
14 through a looking glass. It's two different worlds. But you are not the same. When I got
15 back, my wife later told me that the first two weeks I really didn't talk. I was just
16 absolutely quiet. In fact, we had some neighbors across the street who were good friends
17 of hers (he was a radiologist, really good friends) who very helpful to her while I was in
18 Vietnam. We had them over for dinner one evening when I got back home. We had
19 dinner and I was so used to not being around people in social kinds of situations. I walked
20 out of the house and sat on the patio by myself. My wife came out and said, 'What are
21 you doing out here?' I didn't think anything of it; you gradually get over it. To this day,
22 though, my children will not come up and grab me from behind. You get so accustomed
23 to ducking at sounds. In fact, we were walking along the street in Saigon and we had just
24 gotten a report a week earlier. Actually it was a hit list or assassination list for officers
25 that gave the amount that would be paid for the assassination of a second, or first
26 lieutenant or, captain ... there was a dollar value. Walking along we heard this what
27 sounded like gun fire! Blam! Blam! Blam! I was with two pilots, two commando pilots
28 and we all hit the ground. While we were in the dirt, a bus went by and backfired --blam!
29 Near the end of my tour, a woman and her boyfriend were killed by Vietcong one block
30 from my apartment. He drove the motorbike and she sat on the back of the motorbike and
31 they take off and she shot at the military personnel on the street. They killed her one

1 block from where I lived. You get used to watching. I remember one night, between Tan
2 Son Nhut Air Base and where I lived, I was coming home one night, it was rainy and
3 dark, I passed by all the red light houses where all the prostitutes are, and in the same
4 section was an Army Transportation Unit. I was in what are called jungle fatigues riding
5 a bicycle. It was the easiest form of transportation. I refused to ride a motorbike because I
6 saw too many people killed on them. I was riding a bicycle. It was about midnight, dark,
7 rainy and my pants leg got caught in the bicycle chain. I got off and was bending down to
8 get it uncaught when this U. S. Army Guard who was on this transportation unit said,
9 'Stand up.' I said, 'It's okay I'm U. S. military and I'm just getting my pant leg loose.' He
10 said, 'Stand up, now.' He lowered the M-16 and pointed it at me; this was a loaded gun.
11 So I thought what the hell. I stood up and limped with the bicycle, with my leg caught in
12 the bicycle chain until I got where he could recognize me. One of the favorite ways for
13 the 'sapper squads' (terrorists) was to use a bicycle. They would park a bicycle loaded it
14 with explosives and just park it and walk away from it. You get to where you look over
15 your shoulder constantly. When all of a sudden you don't have to do that, it takes awhile
16 to adjust.

17 JM: Did the public treat you well when you came home or did you have any
18 interactions with them?

19 RW: I had no problems with the public because I came from Fort Walton Beach.
20 It's a military town and a tourist town, too. Eglin Air Force Base is one of the largest
21 bases in the world. I was on one of the auxiliary fields called Hurlburt Field so it was
22 quite common to have people who had been to Vietnam. It was a town that supported the
23 military because it depended on the military for a large part of the budget. It was an awful
24 lot of money. It's still an enormous place. Many military also retired there. It was a huge
25 military presence. There was a lot of support for the military, so I had no problems. That,
26 by the way, is one of the reasons why the year that I was in Vietnam my wife and two
27 children stayed in Fort Walton Beach rather than moving up to Birmingham where my
28 family lived. It was only 225 miles from where my family lived. My family was all in
29 Birmingham, Alabama -- my mother, sister, and my brother; my wife's parents were in
30 South Carolina. Birmingham was a large city that did not support the military. The whole
31 protective network operated for her in Fort Walton Beach so it wasn't an oddity.

1 JM: How do you feel the government handles the veterans today?

2 RW: I'm probably not qualified to answer that, because you only get bits and
3 pieces of information about it. I know that this project that you're doing, for example,
4 you probably would not have been able to do, in fact you would not even suggest to your
5 teachers to do that, say, ten years ago. We just saw the film 'Born on the Fourth of July';
6 I don't know if you seen it or not. Those conditions exist, but whether or not they were
7 worse for Vietnam War Veterans than they were for other veterans or just military
8 Veterans hospitals in general, I can't tell you.

9 JM: Is there anything else that you might like to talk about that maybe I missed
10 going over?

11 RW: Can't think of anything. It would be interesting to see what kind of
12 similarities that you draw from people who were involved in different kind of positions.
13 And it's different, I think, looking back on it then when you were there because you tend
14 to put out of your mind any bad things and remember positive things. Even that
15 experience was helpful to me in some ways because it was good financially. When I went
16 back to graduate school I had lots of money saved and had the GI bill. Even though it was
17 a year of separation, my wife was able to develop independence that she really needed to
18 develop -- independence from me. From that perspective, it was good. But, if I had to do
19 it over again I wouldn't.

20 JM: Thank you very much.

21 RW: How's that?

22 JM: That's great.