

Oral History Transcript Example

Interviewer: Shelby Stokes

Interviewee: Clarence Sims

Date: March 22, 2019

Q: When you were growing up did you come from a military family?

Clarence Sims: No. My daddy was in World War Two but no he did his time and got out.

Q: So not like a military background?

Clarence Sims: No.

Q: How did you feel about the war before you served in it?

Clarence Sims: Well I was a country boy so I really didn't feel. The reason I went was because I was drafted

Q: So do you think you would have enlisted on your own?

Clarence Sims: No. I was already married. I was already planning on not going.

Q: So what was your job in the military?

Clarence Sims: I was a crew chief on a UH1H which is a Huey helicopter which was used for gun ships and med evac choppers.

Q: What does a med evac do?

Clarence Sims: He goes in and picks up wounded personnel.

Q: So you didn't see a lot of combat yourself?

Clarence Sims: Not with the med evac unit. When I was with the 101st we flew into a lot of hot LZs and carried troops in and troops out. With the med evac we strictly we was like a flying ambulance with machine guns on it.

Q: What was a normal day as a med evac? Or was there a normal day?

Clarence Sims: No. Never. You never knew what was goin to happen.

Q: What was the most common injury that you saw?

Clarence Sims: Gunshot wounds

Q: You used a lot of Agent Orange, right?

Clarence Sims: [thinking] When I got there it pretty much backed off the Agent Orange but we was all exposed to it because it was in the vegetation but when I was with the 101st I was up north. I flew up it was around Quang Tri and that area. We flew in and out of the jungle dropping troops off and picking troops up so yeah I was exposed to it from the stirrin up of the helicopter.

Q: Did it cause you any health issues? I know in your testimony you said it did.

Clarence Sims: Yeah I have neuropathy in my feet and I have ischemic heart disease

Q: I know in your testimony you said if went over there and didn't know God here you weren't going to know Him over there. Was your faith ever tested over there? Was there a moment that you felt very heavily tested?

Clarence Sims: Yes, yes. And uh during the last offensive An Loc we was flying in a hot LZ and I've used this in my testimony several times at different places. We was flying down highway five and at An Loc and going in to pick up a wounded troop and we knew... I mean we just... our pilot never said if you wanna turn back someone say something cuz we knew we wouldn't gonna come out of there. Well I made a promise to God if He got us in there and got us out I'd try and do something for Him every day when I got back home. He got us in there and got us out. We was all shot up. None of the personnel was hit but our chopper was all shot up and since I've been home I know I fail Him every day but I try to do something for Him every day or say something to somebody about Him.

Q: You hadn't been married long when you went over there, right?

Clarence Sims: Six months. Well, actually a year when I went over there. We had been married six months when I got drafted.

Q: What was it like when you got drafted? I know you said you got your notice in the mail.

Clarence Sims: [laughs] It was awful. Yeah I got home every day before she did when I worked days and then she'd get home about 5:00 p.m. and I'd get home about 3:15 p.m. And I'd got the

mail and yeah it was awful. It was gut-wrenching, heartbreaking... something you don't... and like I said the day I reported to the draft board in Bessemer (Alabama) she dropped me off and I thought I'd be back that night. Next time she seen me was two weeks later at Christmas time. So yeah it wasn't good.

Q: She (his wife) was pregnant when you left to go to Vietnam, right?

Clarence Sims: Yeah she was five months pregnant.

Q: You said you didn't know your daughter had been born.

Clarence Sims: She was nine days old before the Red Cross found me. I wasn't flying where I was supposed to be flying. I wasn't flying out of our base. I was flying out of a fire base. So yeah she was nine days old. And it was probably one o'clock in the morning and we was flying and they came over the radio on the chopper and the captain, the pilot, the co-pilot, and the other gunner at this time there was two gunners on there all four of us knew at the same time because it was on the airway.

Q: Were you excited? How does that feel finding out that you have a daughter that way?

Clarence Sims: Yeah yeah yeah. I was excited. She was nine days and they told me what day she was born and said her and my wife were doing good. Yeah yeah I was super excited. Didn't have no cigars to pass out. No bubble gum but yeah yeah that was an exciting moment. So then I have two to live for instead of one to get back home.

Q: What was your scariest moment?

Clarence Sims: I really can't tell you what was the most scary moment. There were a lot of scary moments. Yeah. And I tell everybody my favorite time of day is in the morning because if you got to see the sun rise you knew you had made it through another night because that was their main time to be active, was at night. They would bomb our flight pads, they would bomb our barracks, with mortars, you know, so, so, yeah, our...we did a lot of flying at night. So that was a, if you made it to daylight you knew you made it to another day...I got two buddies that live right over the road, one of them has gotten to the point that his diabetes is so bad that he can't hardly

get around and the other one has got...he still struggles with PTSD, a diabetic, neuropathy of the feet—can't hardly walk, he, uh...so I'm blessed. Of course I'm not quite as old as they are so I told Sherry I'm not sure what's going to happen but I am...

Q: When I listen to your testimony they asked you if you were a sot or a head?

Clarence Sims: Most people, if you're in the navy, a head is a restroom...a latrine. We called them latrines in the army, the navy called them heads. So there was one or two of them when I asked them what a sot or head is, one fellow raised his hand because he thought I was talking about restrooms. But, yeah, that was the first time I ever heard that and my old first sergeant asked me that I didn't know what he was talking about. I asked him and he said a sot is a drunk and a head is a smoker. So I told him I was neither one. My daddy drank real heavy, I just never took up the habit. Now I did drink some while I was over there just to wipe out a memory but the next morning it was probably worse than if I had kept the memory. But...I...uh...so he said I don't know what I'm going to do with you. He said I will just put you into the sot barracks and you can make the best of it. He said at least you won't be smelling the smoke getting your head messed up.

Q: So when you say smoke you don't mean cigarettes, right?

Clarence Sims: Marijuana. Oh it was just freely over there. Now the 101st, they were real strict, you didn't have excessive drinking, you didn't have drugs on the base, but when the first calv was a whole different ballgame.

Q: So like heavy alcohol and drug use was just the norm over there?

Clarence Sims: Yeah.

Q: How did you feel about the anti-war movement?

Clarence Sims: The same way I feel about the anti-wall thing. That is a part of life. When there is no more wars is the day when Jesus come back.

Q: How did you feel about the Vietnam War? Were you supportive or just really didn't know?

Clarence Sims: Well, I guess I had to be supportive because I went but I had a brother-in-law that was one ahead of me. I had two or three school buddies that was a couple years older than me that went that I worked around, acquaintance with, and what have you. I had a couple good kin over there. My brother-in-law died three years ago from Agent Orange. But yeah, you know, being a little redneck boy from Alabama you know, lived in the country, it wasn't like being in big cities where you got the marches, rallies, and the wild chills. My daddy would have wild me to death if I had done something like that, you know. So, it was just a way of life. It was going on. I just hoped that I'd never be part of it but I was.

Q: How were you treated when you got back? Did you experience any of the...I know some soldiers were spit on...

Clarence Sims: That was basically the ones, California, Seattle, Oakland, California, that's where we landed when we came back. Yeah. We just got off the one plane there and got on another to come on home. Yeah, those people there were pretty rude. Here, just went back to the normal way of life. I mean, they brought us home, dumped us on the street, and were supposed to be normal again. We weren't normal, no. That's the only time Sherry has ever threatened to leave me was right after I come home. And I told her, I said pack my bags and I'm going to go with you. She has never threatened to leave me again, thank God.

Q: So you said they just sort of dumped you out. Was there any direction of where you would get help if you needed it, your resources or anything.

Clarence Sims: No. Today I've talked to some of these young guys from church who have been to Iraq or what have you. When they get home they take three days to explain all their rights, where they can get help, what they need to know. I've never really knew anything about the VA until just before I retired and I retired 2001. So, I had a friend tell me about it. Then I never knew anything about Agent Orange until my brother-in-law died and we knew he had Agent Orange, you know. My sister asked me one day, she said "Have you ever been screened for Agent

Orange?" I said no, so she kind of wrote me a letter. Told me how to go through the ropes and I did. And, uh, one day eight weeks later I was classified as a 100% disabled veteran, so...

Q: So, I think you've answered it, but how did you handle transitioning back into civilian life back in the U.S.

Clarence Sims: Sherry, how did I handle transitioning in your words?

Sherry Sims: --inaudible—

Clarence Sims: When I came back, I went straight back out to the plant. At that time things was going good, there was lots of overtime. And I always worked two jobs. I've always worked two jobs. So, that kept my mind busy. Now I've had more nightmares since I quit working in November 1967....shoot...2017 I quite working. When I turned 67 I said it was time to quit. So I have more nightmares now than I did then because when I was working I would be dead tired and if I woke up during the night I'd be thinking about something I was supposed to do the next day. Now I'm not doing things the next day so every now and then I'll have a nightmare that I never used to have.

Q: Did you have any issues with PTSD or any mental health issues? I know you said you have nightmares.

Clarence Sims: If I had been talked to by a psychiatrist when I came home yeah I probably would have super issues with PTSD. Uh, and I have talked to the doctor at the VA and she said we can get you some help. She said, more than likely they will want to put you on some medication. I said, well I don't want that kind of help so...I just kind of...me and God and Sherry just kind of worked on it. And when I come home I did...the first Sunday I was home...I did walk the aisle of Prudence Creek Baptist Church and give my life back to God and ask him to take all that away from me. And I forgot a lot of stuff. He did take a lot of stuff away from me. There is still a lot, you know. I'm blessed. I tell everybody I'm blessed.

Q: How do you feel about the war now, in hindsight?

Clarence Sims: Well you know it's all gone. Um. Vietnam is a beautiful place. They have turned it into a tour place. I don't know that I would ever go back over there. But then again...those...the South Vietnamese were just caught up in the time. And I'm not sure they knew what all the fighting was about. Some of them had not been 10 miles away from their house. So, I'm not sure they knew what it was all about. The North Vietnamese kind of bullied anyone they could into fighting for them. But, yeah, I don't have any problem with Vietnam or with the Vietnamese. Every so often...when we was in North Carolina, uh, this past summer there was a guy there he was married to a Vietnamese. And a lot of GIs brought them back home as their wife. He asked where I had been, because I had my cap on. She asked where have I been and I told her. Well, I had been right around her hometown Bien Hoa. So

Q: So looking back now, do you think that the...I know it's like the most controversial war. But do you think it was a good idea for the U.S. to get involved in Vietnam? There is no right or wrong answer.

Clarence Sims: Yeah, I really don't know how to answer that. It's kind of like this gas tax we just got Shanghaied into that. We really didn't have a say so...so I really don't want to answer that.

Q: That's fine. How do you feel about, if this happens to you, do you ever wear the baseball hats or Vietnam War Vet stuff like that?

Clarence Sims: Yeah. I'm a cap person, like your dad. I've had this one a long time. This is one I shared in my testimony because I was a crew chief. Crew chief/door gunner, I can't just say crew chief.

Sherry Sims: Most people when he has got his caps on, they'll say oh thank you. Thank you for doing what you did. At that time, no respect whatsoever. And that's what was so sad. The country did not back them. It was an ugly war but they didn't have a choice.

Q: So when you wear these hats out, she said people will thank you for your service.

Clarence Sims: They do. And you never know when you are looking at someone and they don't have a cap on or a shirt on, who was there and who was not there. Yeah, we are kind of like a band of brothers. It don't matter if you see somebody else, you know you are going to shake their hand. Ask them, tell them, try to see them home, and ask them where they was.

Q: How does it make you feel when people say that?

Clarence Sims: You know, when people shake my hand and thank me, I really most of the time don't know how to react. I usually say thank you for thanking me. That's usually my answer.

Q: And this is probably the question I am looking forward to the most. What is something you wish people from my generation knew about the war and what you went through or veterans in general?

Clarence Sims: I really hope your generation don't have to go through any of it. I hope they go ahead and get ISIS stamped out and get Iraq squared away. It is not pretty. A war. Nothing about war is pretty. Most of the time nothing about war comes out to the good. When they pulled the American troops out of Vietnam in 1975, within 6 months North Vietnamese had taken over. It became a communist country. So 58,000 some odd guys were killed over there. All of the minds that were destroyed over there. Uh, the guys with Agent Orange. They didn't do anything. They went and served their country, they did what their country told them to do. But they didn't do anything.

Q: Is there anything else that you want to like say or talk about? Anything that I have missed?

Clarence Sims: I am doing this for you. [laughs]

Shelby Stokes: Let's look at your medals.

Clarence Sims: This one here tells I went with the med evac unit 17th day of February 1972. I left them the 14th day of June 1972. That's when I went with 228 the assault helicopter company.

Q: How do you feel about getting all the awards?

Clarence Sims: Eh. Like I said they've been put up ever since I been home. This I guess this is the probably first time we've ever got them out. The uh and our company commander there he

flew us ever so often and because I was from Alabama the pilot and the co-pilot in my med evac chopper was from Texas and uh the medic that I spent most of the time with was a big old Pollack out of...shoot...out of the Bronx so he enjoyed flying with us. So so we was flying one day and we had been in a hot LZ and we had picked up a guy that was shot. Once we got back into the air we always came out with the hot side on my side so the medic could be working on the troop we come back out and I always helped him I don't know what I was doing for some reason I had my knife out and I stuck it in my leg, I mean I still got a scar. And I was bleeding like a stuck hog. So when the lieutenant, colonel seen it he said "what happened to you? Why are you bleeding?" I said "I stuck my knife in my leg". He said, "are you sure"? I said "I'm positive" he said "well when"? I said "when was in there when I was trying to help him". I guess I was trying to cut his pants or clothes off. I don't know. He said "well I'm gonna turn you in for a purple heart" and I said "no". I said "no don't do that" I said "I stuck myself". He said "it don't matter. It happened in combat". He said "I'm gonna get you a purple heart". I said "no". I begged him not to. So that's why I... he tried his best to get me a purple heart. I was there doing my job. I was doing my year so I could come home. But when I came home they give me my discharge papers and let me out. They was through with me. I was drafted, I was supposed to be two years obligation. I went in for basic training which was Fort Polk, Louisiana. AIT was Fort Eustis, Virginia. They sent me, I came home for thirty day leave, they sent me to Vietnam. I spent like seven days being twelve months over there. I never did take an out of country R&R so I got to come home seven days early and then they give me my discharge papers. I went back to work at US Steel.

Q: Were you so happy to come back home?

Clarence Sims: Oh yes. Yes. When I... I called Sherry. She didn't know I was coming home and I called her and I told her I'll be at Birmingham at the airport in the morning. Seems like it was 8 or 9 o'clock, I'm not sure. But I said "will you pick me up?" She said "well sure". That was the first time I'd seen her in a year and the first I'd ever seen Christy. So there was two

blonde headed beauties, you know. Got home, it was the first time I'd drove a car in a year. I had a 65 GTO. When I pulled up at my mama's house and my mama was out there working in her flowers, she always worked in her flowers. Well my sister and her husband had a yellow Plymouth and I had yellow GTO and I pulled up and blew the horn cause sherry was supposed to been at work and I blew the horn and she thought it was Neil and Ella Mae and she just waved. So I got out of the car and I said "you're not even gonna turn around and speak to me?" So that was a real experience.

Q: Did you work at US Steel before you went?

Clarence Sims: yeah yeah. See by being drafted that helped. My time went right on.

Q: So your job was still open when you came back?

Clarence Sims: yeah. Have you ever seen an airmail envelope? Hey we made a promise when we left that we would write each other even if we didn't have nothing to say. She's got every letter, every day I wrote. I wrote her something every day. It might have been corny, back then it wasn't corny. She's got every letter I ever wrote her. Well I couldn't keep mine. She's got everyone of them in a box. Every now and then I tell her we need to burn them. [we both laugh]... that was an air mail envelope and being in the military it was all free. See that what I tell them young guys now, today they can cell phone, skype, all this. Well if you read them you'd probably think "what he mean? What is this? What's this all about?" [we both laugh]...

Q: If it's okay, can I get a picture of you in one of your hats? Whichever one.

Clarence Sims: Sure. I want you to at least get a B!

Q: What was it like seeing your daughter for the first time?

Clarence Sims: If you get you a baby, it would be like the same thing when you seen it for the first time. Only thing mine was eight months old... This is a riverboat. Their life expectancy was something like three seconds. If you was on the railroad crew you were over the time, you weren't expected to live no time. Ours was three minutes. When you went over there whatever

you was they give you a life expectancy of how long you was gonna live or how long you should've lived.

Q: What was your life expectancy?

Clarence Sims: three minutes. The riverboat was next to nothing and like I said if you was on the railroad you owed them time.

Q: What does sprayed and betrayed mean?

Clarence Sims: Sprayed with Agent Orange and the government didn't want to tell nobody about it. You'd be surprised at the guys that are already dead and gone that never knew anything about Agent Orange and their families didn't get any benefits from it. And that's actually what killed... I have a friend...his daughter bought twenty acres that sherry and I had down in the country last year and her dad is already dead and gone. He didn't have a clue about what was wrong with him. He never used the VA and he never knew about Agent Orange. I wouldn't have known nothing if it hadn't been for my sister.

Q: So the government failed y'all?

Clarence Sims: Yeah.

