Sara Cassidy

Dr. Steinbock-Pratt

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Interview Transcript

Sara: For the record this is Sara Cassidy interviewing Michael James Cassidy on the evening of November 5 2019. To begin, please state your name for the record.

Michael: My name is Michael James Cassidy.

Sara: When and where were you born?

Michael: I was born in 1959, um July 6th in uh Limestone, Maine.

Sara: How old were you when the Vietnam War started?

Michael: When it started?

Sara: Yes.

Michael: Uh [exhales] it was in the sixties. I was around ten.

Sara: About ten years old?

Michael: Yeah

Sara: What were the first things that your remembered hearing?

Michael: There was a lot of uh talk good and bad about the Vietnam War. Um my dad was a big Nixon fan so uh he was for the war.

Sara: Was that the general attitude where you lived?

Michael: Um yes that was the general attitude where I lived.

Sara: Did it remain that way throughout the course of the war?

Michael: No, it did not. Uh towards the end the uh attitude towards the uh Vietnam War was uh more uh that it was a bad war, that uh we were there for the wrong reasons. Um people that we knew were not coming back.

Sara: Uh what was the thoughts among people your age?

Michael: Well we kinda uh didn’t think about it. I mean, we were young, it was not something we though about.

Sara: Were you ever worried that you’d get drafted?

Michael: Yeah I was worried about it, getting drafted. I did have a card uh so did my older brother, who also had a card. And we were concerned that we’d be drafted, yeah.

Sara: Did you know anyone who was drafted?

Michael: No, did not anybody who was drafted.

Sara: Did you or anyone you know participate in anti-war protests?

Michael: Uh no, no one I know or me participated no.

Sara: What did you or friends your age think of those who did participate?

Michael: Um [exhales] mixed feelings ok, uh you know at the end of the war or close to the end it was cool to be protesting ok and be against it. Uh again our family was uh more uh aligned with uh the war was uh something we were supposed to be doing.

Sara: So that was how your family felt even towards the end?

Michael: Even towards the end.

Sara: And why do you think this was?

Michael: Um again my dad was a uh a big fan of Nixon even was Nixon was uh proven to be guilty of covering up the Watergate scandal. We were in uh, we lived in D.C. at the time so uh it was real close to home.

Sara: Do you think this was the only reason?

Michael: [long exhale] Pretty much. My dad was a one-way thinker.

Sara: I understand you joined the military outside of high school?

Michael: I did, I joined the military while I was in high school.

Sara: How old were you?

Michael: Seventeen.

Sara: So this would have been what year?

Michael: Uh 1976, two years after the war ended.

Sara: What was the reaction among people when the war did end?

Michael: Uh grateful that it was over um and you know they wanted to put it behind them. You know, they did not uh look favorable upon service people. It kind of uh made it uncomfortable to be in the service.

Sara: Was that something you felt personally since you’re from a military family?

Michael: Oh, absolutely. Uh we felt it personally. Uh it made things difficult at times. Um I remember one time uh we were headed off uh on deployment going through an airport and people were spitting at us and calling us uh kid-killers or something like that, I don’t know. Tried not to pay too much attention to them.

Sara: So, given the sort of ant-service sentiment at this point, what motivated you to join the military?

Michael: Hmm um we came from a poor family. Um my dad was in the Air Force. Um he got a uh sick and he got medically discharged. Um so uh again it was tough for him to find a job, he did the best he could. When I was uh getting ready to graduate high school there was no jobs, there was no job prospects, uh there was no money for college um it was pretty much a dead end the only choice I had was to get in the military to get out or my situation.

Sara: Do you have a history of service in your family besides your father?

Michael: Absolutely, um let’s see my grandfather your grand Uncle Paul, he died of Agent Orange.

Sara: So you did have someone who served in Vietnam…

Michael: Yeah

Sara: And died?

Michael: Yeah. He died later, he uh he died after he got back to the United States he was a uh a Army Ranger and he had uh Brain Cancer, they discovered it and two months later he was dead.

Sara: And this was because of Agent Orange?

Michael: Agent Orange is what they said later, yes.

Sara: Did he ever talk about his experiences in the war?

Mike: We were more interested in talking about his car [laughs]. He had a split-window, blue corvette. That never started when it was cold.

Sara: Did it ever seem to you that he had trouble readjusting when he came back?

Michael: No um he was one of my favorite uncles so no.

Sara: What was your parent’ s reaction to you joining the military?

Michael: Um at that time they were getting divorced and uh they were both uh happy that I was going somewhere instead of staying nowhere.

Sara: You joined after the war had ended what was the general perception of the military at the time?

Michael: Again, the general perception of the military at the time was baby-killers and no-good and most people didn’t like service people and it was something they tried to avoid.

Sara: How did you come to be stationed in the South China Sea?

Michael: Um well that a real good question. By accident, they asked me where I wanted to go and uh I put down all East Coast except for Bermuda and Hawaii and uh I qualified for air crew, so they were in short supply so they uh sent me to Hawaii.

Sara: Ok. Um, you’ve mentioned to me that you were stationed several times in Southeast Asia. Where were you stationed?

Michael: Um many places. Uh we went and travelled and quite a bit. I was in Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Philippines, goodness all over.

Sara: What was the general attitude towards Americans and American soldiers in these locations?

Michael: Usually pretty good uh in fact the reception was better overseas than it was at home.

Sara: Really?

Michael: Really.

Sara: How so?

Michael: Um they were more welcoming, more friendly, warm.

Sara: Ok. So you mentioned to me that you participated I believe airlifting refugees?

Michael: Um there was a great exodus out of Vietnam um it started becoming more of a thing in 1978, the Vietnamese were exiting the country in boats, they would uh cram onto a boat and put out to sea and try to get anywhere else besides Vietnam. We would fly out of where we were at at the time and try to locate these boats and try to steer vessels to them to rescue them and uh you know try to provide them assistance. Try to scare off the Thai pirates uh who would uh attack these boats and uh steal, kill, rape whatever, the occupants of these boats. Um we had uh the largest uh vessel um 60-foot, it had 210 people on it. That’s quite a few people on a boat but uh we rescued them.

Sara: Can you describe to me that experience?

Michael: Yeah we were happy because we that was our job, was to do it and we found someone, wasn’t the only people we found but that was the largest that we found. They were dead in the water um and uh needed help. We had uh later on designed these uh packages that we would drop on them. Cardboard boxes slowed down by parachutes uh with rice and water in them and supplies. And we tried to drop them as near to the boat as we could. So we dropped those and then we uh directed some boats to uh save them.

Sara: How did you locate these boats?

Michael: Uh we would fly uh about 100 feet or below over the water um all over in search patterns.

Sara: Search patterns?

Michael: Yeah we were given designated search patterns by our uh our command.

Sara: Sort of like being on a patrol?

Michael: Sort of like patrol yeah. So you would fly uh a box and we developed a way to fly the box efficiently and we’d fly it and try to find someone in that box.

Sara: Ok, so you never um put refugees like onto the ships or planes that you were in?

Michael: Uh, could not. Our planes were too large to land on aircraft carriers, uh they couldn’t land on water um best we could do was uh try and get ships to come to the boats. We would use flare, dropping flares in a line to the refugees. We would try flying with the boats and flying to the refugees. We’d try waving our wings, anything to get the boats’ attention and to get them to deviate course uh to the refugees. The boats really didn’t like doing that because it cost them money to deviate from their from their course. Um but a lot did, a lot of people did and they saved quite a few people.

Sara: Do you know what happened to these refugees after they got on to the boats?

Michael: Uh yeah they were uh put onto uh different, different countries. We actually met some of them uh they were barracked at the barracks next to where we were. So we got to meet some of them. Nice people.

Sara: Did they ever tell you anything about what was going on back in Vietnam?

Michael: Um no we didn’t talk about that.

Sara: They didn’t want to talk about it or…

Michael: I don’t know if they wanted to talk about it or not. Uh we just didn’t talk about it.

Sara: You mentioned these boats were often susceptible to attacks by Thai pirates?

Michael: The Thai pirates, yes. They to this day are still there.

Sara: They are?

Michael: Yes they uh inhabit some islands of the coast of Thailand.

Sara: This was a frequent concern for the military?

Michael: It was always a frequent concern, they’d shoot at us so yeah it was, it was a concern.

Sara: So did were you ever shot at by these pirates?

Michael: As far as I know, yes.

Sara: You were in planes.

Michael: We were in planes yeah it wasn’t like they had much of a uh a shot. We flew as we could as low as we could, try to stay away from them if we could.

Sara: So the official US policy was to try not to engage them?

Michael: Yes, we were not supposed to engage.

Sara: Um do you know anything about the refugee camps these refugees were taken to?

Michael: Uh again, they were a number of them were in the barracks next to ours. So that’s the only one I knew of. They were treated nicely as far as I know. They were free to come and go, yeah.

Sara: Ok. Um so did you ever, after the war ended there was obviously a downshift in the uh view of US military back home. Yes? Like sort of a negative perception.

Michael: Well um perception just kind of went away. Eventually we weren’t looked at as negatively as we were before, it started getting better yeah.

Sara: Over time that negativity went away?

Michael: Yeah, it did. But uh yeah it went more into, you know, we didn’t talk about it. There were a few people who were in Vietnam, at one time or another um my ordinance man was in Vietnam, he told me some stories um his name was Jack. We called him Combat Jack. I’m not repeating those stories.

Sara: Ok, we went through all my questions.

Michael: Ok.

Sara: Is there anything you’d like to tell me related to the subject?

Michael: Um, don’t know how I still feel about the war. I’m glad I helped rescue people. Um and that’s about it. You know, it’s still pretty much a private thing.

Sara: I understand. Thank you for your time.