Interviewer: Andrew Nix Williams

Interviewee: Charles Swann

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0:00 Q. will you say your name for me

Charles Swann: Charles Swann

0:10 Q: do you have a history of military service in the family?

Charles Swann: yes uhm well all the way back to uhm at least my great grandfather who served in the Civil War who was in the confederacy. My grandfather did not serve he kind of fell in between uhm too young or too old for World War One and definitely too old for world War II, my Dad was in the navy, actually uhm he and his brother joined before they got out of high school so uhm yeah, I have a history of it in my family.

0:55 Q. so did you volunteer or were you drafted

Charles Swann: (laughs) yes, I volunteered. I was trying to remember the other night, back at the time I think the country had gone to a uhm lottery system for the draft and uhm I guess the way it worked, they drew a number for your birth date, I’m pretty sure that’s the way it was, and the higher the number the less likely you were going to be drafted. And after I joined, I think my lottery number was around 360 something so I probably wouldn’t have joined but I joined

1:49 Q. Why did you join?

Charles Swann: I think patriotism had some to do with it and I remember I was you know 19 years old and still wet behind the ears uhm a lot uhm and I think with each generation we get a little bit younger for our age. I don’t think we mature as much as our parents and grandparents did. I think that’s probably because of the life they lived and the lack of things they had. You can look in old high school books uhm back in the 30s 40s and 20s and the kids then looked like adults to me so I think some of it was patriotism and I like to think it was uhm I’ve always been a conservative and a hawk so to speak, growing up I think it has a lot to do with the way I was raised uhm the fact that my father served was a part of it. During my generation we saw a lot of John Wayne movies, so you have the wrong impression of what its like to be in combat and I think a large part of it I read somewhere that this is kind of typical of the marine corps. a lot of kids join just to prove that they can do it. so I think a combination of all those things is why I joined. Plus I had graduated from high school in 68 and went to Mississippi state for a year. Had a great time . flunked out. And that was the summer I flunked out so at the time I guess they were gonna get me anyway if I was going in I was going in as a Marine. Also one other factorI think that influenced me was I had a really good friend that was uhm a year or so older than I was and he joined the Marine corps so I think that had some influence on me too and then I had a couple of friends that I went to high school with joined at the same time as I did on what they use to call it the buddy plan. So, all that together that big wad of ball of facts is probably the reason.

Q.so you went with your buddies to volunteer

Charles Swann: yeah

Q. and what year was that ?

Charles Swann: uhm 69

5:21 Q: what rank did you hold in the Marines?

Charles Swann: everybody starts as a private and then I got promoted to PFC private first class and when I was discharged, I was a lance corporal

5:36 Q: so when were you sent to Vietnam

Charles Swann: I believe it was early April. Landed in Den nang and went to Cap school for a few weeks you know as a side bar I’ve got to tell you I was thinking about what I was gonna say today and what you might ask me and I kind of pushed a lot of my experiences of Vietnam. just pushed them in the back of my mind. I was, earlier last year I got to thinking about CAP teams and started getting online and found some rosters, but they are completely incomplete uhm they are very incomplete is what I should say but uhm anyway landed in de nang and went to Cap School for 3 or 4 weeks.

7:00 Q. where was the CAP school at?

Charles Swann: it was in Chu-lai NO it was in De nang I believe and basically what they did, you didn’t volunteer for a CAP team that’s just where they put you. That’s where you were assigned. So uhm went to CAP school for 3 or 4 weeks and they taught you uhm some phrases and so forth in Vietnamese. I can’t even remember some of the phrases. And kind of taught you about what you would be doing so far as trying to train the local military, militia, popular forces were what they were referred too, kind of like our national guard I think but anyway that was in April and in uhm may, end of April we got out of CAP school and assigned to our various CAP teams. That’s when I went to Chu-Lai

8:30 Q: so it was De nang and Chu-Lai?

Charles Swann: mhm well denang at the CAP school then to Chu-Lai then out to my CAP team. My CAP team was outside of Chu-Lai we weren’t in Chu-Lai that’s where our headquarters was but our CAP team wasn’t.

8:58 Q: what was your first impression, well of Vietnam in total?

Charles Swann: you know the first thing that comes to my mind, well first of all when we landed uhm in de nang we got off and the heat and humidity was like walking into a brick wall and Im from Alabama so I should be use to that but that kind of hit me and the other impression I had of Vietnam that was the nastiest place ive ever been to. The people were nasty and it as just nasty, I don’t think, I read that other veterans have said about how beautiful it was and It it wasn’t beautiful to me just nasty. After my, during my first ambush we were set up and uhm crazy enough I don’t know what made it fall but a coconut fell and hit me on my hand right there (right hand) you can still kind of see the scar but it just scratched it you know no big deal. Uhm but it got exposed to you know the water over there and I got what we call a goop sore just a big ole nasty sore, just a nasty place, a nasty place.

10:45 Q: were there any rumors about what you were getting into

Charles Swann: no the only uhm the only rumor that I heard before I went out before I went out to my CAP team was that my unit had been overrun or they tried to overrun them so many months before, several months before last year uhm maybe in 68 during the Tet Offensive but at any rate the rumor was that they were overrun or almost overrun and it was pretty hot fire fight and it was kind of uhm unnerving so to speak but not really anything other than that.

11:52 Q: just so people can know what is a CAP team?

Charles Swann: that’s an anacronym for a Combined Action Platoon and the way that functions or works is the CAP team consists of up to a squad of marines so about 13, 12 to 13 with the team leader. Which in our case was the sergeant which was the highest rank in the field then we had a navy corpsman assigned to us, our unit and our purpose was to I guess intermingle with the Vietnamese but our primary purpose was to train the popular forces kind of an OJT, hell of an OJT for a PF but our responsibility was to train those PFs and the uhm popular forces and setting up parameters, ambushes, patrols, that kind of thing kinda. I think looking back I believe that Washington was trying to ease out of it then, and I think the CAP teams started in 64, 65 and uhm I think it was probably a good idea and a good plan to kind of start backing us out but uhm anyway that was our purpose that’s a CAP team, and we had a certain area to patrol. I think we had 3 clicks or 3 sections, in our case 3 villages we would move from one villager to the next, might stay here one day , might stay here two days might stay a night.

14:01 Q: Did you Walk?

Charles Swann: (chuckles) yeah we walked

14:06Q: can you tell me about the men in your unit?

Charles Swann: all about the same age as me, the sarg I would say was in his early twenties but most everyone else was pretty much a kid, some of them had uhm been in country several months uhm I don’t think I had anybody in my team that had reupped and gone back to Vietnam I think one trip should be enough I know some did but not on my team. Just regular folks just like me and you which was what just made it kind of hard for some of us uhm under appreciated and under loved I guess you can say when you come back home but just regular guys some of them a little quiet and some not so quiet. We had one guy that use to love to run point. And what that is,when you go out on patrol you have a man way out ahead of you kind of picking your way through, that’s not a good place to be in my opinion but he liked it so he almost always, he and one PF would always run point and uhh I would be loaded down with a flat jacket and extra strings of ammo and canteens and a frags and a helmet and hes running point in a flip flops and shorts with no shirt on. I mean he was just a crazy guy but uhh anyway.

16:33 Q: what kind of jobs did you do? Besides training.

Charles Swann: that’s it just training and setting up parameters, at night we would move to a certain village we would, uhh the team leader which was a sergeant like I said the radioman and the corpsman would usually be in the center of the parameter or the center of the village and we go out in pairs and set up a perimeter usually we just sit in somebodies hooch or outside it, the little hut so to speak and usually take watch until morning about 1 or 2 o’clock till daylight then the PFs would take watch early and the reason for that was if we were gonna get hit, its likely it was gonna be after midnight and the PFs were about to go to sleep and uhh.

17:55 Q: why midnight?

Charles Swann: I think because the dinks would think you would not be suspecting them. You’d be asleep you know early in the morning. And that’s one thing about Vietnam, about the Vietnamese, the Vietcong, they were uhm. To be a backwards country they were pretty ingenious in the way they fought. For example they knew that a damn American was gonna kick a damn can in the path. So they set a booby trap up. You go to kick the can and you draw back a nub, they kind of knew us psychologically if that’s the word to use. They kind of played off that . I don’t know how I got off to that but that’s the reason the marines would take watch early in the morning because thats when they were most likely to hit us.

19:25 Q: you already mentioned it before but how much combat did you experience?

Charles Swann: minimal, I did get in uhm, I was in a few firefights but our CAP team luckily enough, we were on the south china sea we were on a, one of our villages was on the beach and we went out on a , our area was not that hot, we got in a few fire fights but it was not like uhm. You are gonna hear from Bill Earnest but other CAP teams adjacent to us would sometimes get some, have some heavy duty infield but that was another thing about the CAP teams, you asked how we moved around, we had a certain area and another team had a certain area so if this team (gestured to the the team next to him) got in trouble we could move to them if that was necessary, that never… maybe once that happened but I would say minimal combat, I was in combat and I have a combat action ribbon but uhm nothing heavy.

21:09 Q:so how is combat normally fought? is it hand to hand? Or ambush or?

Charles Swann: no no , we didn’t do any of that, now.. I didn’t, we didn’t, when I was there we didn’t experience any of that now most of the firefights we had M16s and M60. M60 machine gun and what we called a blooper which is a grenade launcher and basically its just a firefight like you see on TV pretty much it was none of the. Now there was hand to hand combat in Vietnam and some marine corps and army platoons that were on patrol got into that some and I’m not saying some of the CAP teams didn’t but I didn’t thank goodness. We were trained in hand to hand combat but I didn’t experience any of that, my experiences was pretty much all simple firefight. Either we were trying to ambush them or they tried to ambush us.

22:30 Q: and how long did those fights last?

Charles Swann: different, it seemed like when they were going on it seemed like forever but uhm in my case. Again this is my experience not necessarily the experience of everybody else over there, not necessarily the experience of the average marine or the average soldier but you know they could go anywhere from five minutes to thirty minutes, I mean you know we didn’t have any all day type of situations simply because the way we operated. The one experience, the one experience, one of my first firefights I was in we went on patrol and of course I was loaded up, I was loaded for brass helmet on boots on, flat jacket, ammo strapped across my soldiers. I had a of course the M16.. I don’t think I was carrying a blooper I had several frags all over me. man I must have been carrying a hundred pounds and I was scared to death. But anyway went on patrol and went into this village that we heard had some Vietcong in the area and we went to try to root them out to see if they were there and well the village was gone they just left. They left their breakfast fires burning they just, everybody was gone. So uhm we, and I don’t know why we did this but probably wasn’t paying attention but we went from a brushy area across rice patties into this village, this small hamlet village that was set up on the opposite hill or rise and nobody was there and we looked around and we may or may not have destroyed the village and I mean just a few huts and uhm then we headed back across the rice patties and of course I’m lugging all this crap and we get about halfway across the rice patties and we have the m60 machine gun set up on this side of the rice patties facing the village. And we get about half way across the damn rice patty or field and they open up on us from over here (other side not with machine gun) they had been hiding in the brush and of course we all took off heading this direction for some cover and uhm I just remember thinking all this shit I had on me, sorry I didn’t mean to say that

Williams: no you’re fine

Charles Swann: uhm (laughing) when I got to the other side of the field there was a little terrace and uhm about as high as that desk right there

Williams: a few feet

Charles Swann: and it had just brushy briars and I just made a dive and I got stuck halfway in between and another marine had to come up and push me off the thing and they were shooting us and it wasn’t funny at the time but its pretty funny looking back on it

26:30 Q:do you think you were prepared?

Charles Swann: well yeah uhm, yeah, yes I think I was. Paris Island when I came out of Paris Island if my drill instructor had told me to take out a 45 and shoot you in the head I would have taken out a 45 and shot you in the head I mean that’s what you’ve got to be prepared. You cant be questioning what your CO is telling you to do or your platoon leader is telling you to do you just got to do it. So uhm as far as that yeah but uhm mentally I’m still a 19 year old and uhm you know I was home sick and I miss my parents uhm I was married and Tab my oldest son was a baby and matter of fact he was born while I was over there after I just got in country he was born. That is what you are not prepared for you know or well I wasn’t prepared for but uh so far as to be well prepared other than that I yeah I think I was.

Q:28:12 are there any experiences you want to talk about?

Charles Swann: no well not another other than the funny stuff. But uhm I was lucky I didn’t see a lot of combat. It wasn’t day in and day out uhm I didn’t uhm I don’t think anybody in the CAP team I was in was uhm came out mentally disturbed but there were some folks I’m sure you know that came out pretty screwed up but I wasn’t thankfully and I had a friend that went all the way through Paris island and CAP school and he was on a different CAP team and he got hooked up with drugs and I think it pretty much burned his brain up and he uhm he’s not I haven’t seen him in 20 years but last time I saw him he wasn’t 100 percent but no I didn’t have any other experiences so uhm.

30:00 Q: you mentioned villages, when you got to them, you said they were set up like just a few huts or was it different normally.

Charles Swann: well the main villages that we patrolled and worked in ,stayed in they were more than a few huts but I don’t know how many huts but it was a settlement it was a village and it was more than a few huts . you know you asked me about my impression of Vietnam and that was an experience and why I remember this I don’t know but of course you had no refrigeration in those villages but the mama-sans. Some of them .would walk wherever they went to and they would get cokes, coca-colas, in bottles, hot, bring them back to the village and sell them to us for 50 cents a piece. Now 50 cents to you is not a lot of money, not a lot of money to anyone right now but back then it was a lot of money and we paid it. It was kind of strange stuff like that and we got our supplies through a uh.

31:45 Q: so in these villages how did they react to you or any Americans in there.

Charles Swann: uhm ok. I feel like looking back on it I feel like they tolerated us. I don’t think they looked at us as their savior so to speak like they looked at soldiers in world war 2 uhm. You know I think those folks have been fighting for like 2000 years and the French fought them forever and the French couldn’t beat them. They have a history of that and I guess to them I think they tolerated us.

32:50 Q: so did you get to train any Vietnamese people personally.

Charles Swann: no not personally just as a unit, carrying em out on ambushes and setting up parameters and patrol and that kind of stuff is about all.

33:10 Q: how old were they normally?

Charles Swann: well you know I read I guess it was last year when I was looking for some information on CAP teams and they said they were very young or very old, I don’t remember them like that I remember them being late 20s early 30s and there were some young ones and you always had to watch out for kids. The Cong, they would use any means they could if that meant blowing up a kid they didn’t care. But uhm the PFS popular forces I don’t remember them being, well, our age matter of fact the guy I was talking to you about that ran point he , the PF that would ran point when he didn’t he couldn’t have been older than 25 so id say about that age yeah.

34:35 Q: you mentioned before you had flak jackets and grenades and ammo all over. Did you bring anything from home?

Charles Swann: no uhmm yeah no

34:48 Q: and how often were you able to get in touch with your family?

Charles Swann: not at, well the first day in the bush they called the red cross. using the uhm Ham radio operators got me word that Tab had been born and I think I talked with his mother just for a little bit I mean they literally called me off the chopper to get that phone call and I talked to her for a few minutes and the rest was letters and uhm they were pretty intermittent .

35:45Q: and how did you get the letters?

Charles Swann: they brought em out of the Charlie Charlie bird. To get to our area uhm well the only way to get there the way we got there was by a chopper and all our supplies and mail all that came to us on that chopper. And we Called it a Charlie Charlie bird I don’t know what the hell it really was but it was a chopper it wasn’t a gunship that was for sure and they uhm would come in and unload few supplies, cigarettes and stuff, MRAs cig rations and cigarettes we got free cigarettes, I smoked back then so that was pretty cool and until they didn’t bring the right brand. I remember one time they brought , all the cigarettes were menthol, I don’t smoke menthol cigarettes I hate menthol cigarettes I take those cigarettes apart and we them and try to get that menthol out, that doesn’t work by the way but anyway it come on that chopper when they brought our supplies they’d bring a mail bag and I don’t really remember how often it came but it didn’t come that often maybe once a month, maybe twice a month something like that.

37:40 Q:did you get any news of what the US was doing or just.

Charles Swann: no , you know it seems like we got a stars and stripes, a newspaper would come in every so often but uhm we didn’t really have any, other than we might hear as a rumor and really wouldn’t hear . I mean we were really just isolated we didn’t have a clue what was going on over here so uhm we were pretty isolated.

38:28 Q: and when were you shipped back to the U.S.

Charles Swann: its kind of an interesting story, I guess the good lord, I listed down the other day how many times I knew the good lord saved my ass and while I was over there I have a younger sister and she was born with a hip and leg defect and uhm one was longer than the other one and they had an operation on her and basically just cut her leg off and took out a section of bone and pushed it back together and uhm the day I left for Paris island my dad had a heart attack

Williams: I’m sorry to hear that

Charles Swann: that’s the first heart attack he had and while I was over there he had another one and at the same time my sister was having the operation so they sent me home on what was called emergency leave and that was like 15 or 30 days I don’t remember exactly but anyway that was late summer July or August maybe or something like that and uhm that was 70…71 and uhm when it was about time for me to go back the CO had stationed me with a uhm to check in with a reserve unit in Birmingham and uhm when it got time for me to go back the CO called me in and said Corporal Swann you’ve got I don’t remember exactly how they said it but basically I’ve been informed you can go back to Vietnam, you will not be back to the same CAP team we cant promise what CAP team you will be with or you can take an honorable discharge.(after long pause) say that again. (laughter) and I don’t have to take any time to think about this uhm and that just kind of confounded me cause instead of having service time in the marines and they uhm I still had time to go back to Vietnam but then shortly after I learned they were withdrawing all the CAP teams, like in 72 or so they brought all the CAP teams back out or Nixon did, so the only thing I figure is they didn’t want to spend the money to send me back over there just to turn around put ne on a plane and bring me back. I didn’t question it though I just thank the good lord that he let that happen to me. Then uhm again shortly then after some of my friends were coming back and uhm that was when we started pulling, they pulled the CAP teams out then in 73 Is when they started withdrawing all the troops, the Last of the troops were going out so I was out there 3 or 4 months, I came back in July or August something like that.

42:45 Q: was it kind of difficult coming back home

Charles Swann: Hell no, uhm no uhm ok I would occasionally uhm I would occasionally have nightmares I remember one distinctly and I was in bed at home at my mom and dads house and the damn dinks dropped a rocket in the pasture next to the house and (smacks hands) hit the floor. Other times my wife said I tried to strangle her but other than that no, I really didn’t have a hard time coming back. I was grateful to be back and while I saw some of the stuff some of the kids back home were doing like spitting on veterans or people in uniform that kind of stuff I thankfully didn’t get any of that, I know it went on and that’s disappointing but you know it was not hard for me to re-assimilate back into a civilian mind and I was grateful for it

44:35 Q: and did you get to keep up with , keep in touch with the men in your group.

Charles Swann: I did at first and then I kind of lost touch with them, its kind of like high school you know when you leave high school you think your friends then are gonna be your friends forever and you never gonna lose touch but in a year or so you think about them but you’ve lost touch with them a long time ago.