Ben Sundock

Interviewing my father, Jon, about my grandfather, Michael

**Ben Sundock:** Yes, I can hear you.

**Jon Sundock:** Okay.

**Ben:** Are you ready?

**Jon:** Ready.

**Ben:** So, just start off by telling me a little bit about what your dad did in Vietnam.

**Jon:** So, I will begin telling you a little bit about my father, Michael Sundock’s, background. So, my father, your grandfather, was born in 1939, and when he was a very young child, his parents, your great grandparents, during World War II helped to take in soldiers who were in the area and would stay in their house. This began my father’s interest in the military as a very young boy. So that is why he ended up going into the military for a while and he enjoyed that experience in general. He was in the ROTC when he went to Vanderbilt University and graduated in 1961. And he would then go on to law school right after that at Cumberland law school, in Birmingham, and then went into active military duty in the mid-60’s. He was in the army and my father was an exceptional shooter and in fact won a number of marksman’s awards because of his shooting ability. And so, when he had the opportunity and at the time, he was in the JAG Corps which is the Judge Advocate General J-A-G, that’s the lawyers for the army. He was asked to go and be involved with the JAG Corps to oversee issues that came up from soldiers in the military, so, he did that for a while. He ended up doing basic training for also he did some training in Virginia at Fort Lee and at the time, he was married to my mother. Then, he went on assignment, I do not remember the exact year, maybe 1967 or 1968? I don’t remember exactly. But, he went overseas and I think he was in Saigon. I think. And he was responsible for working with the JAG Corps there. I don’t think he saw active military action while he was there. I can’t remember if he was there during the Tet Offensive. I don’t remember him mentioning that. But he did tell me a number of stories about his experience in the JAG Corps. Do you want me to tell you those?

**Ben:** Yes.

**Jon:** Ok. Remember when he was working as part of the JAG Corps, he was in his later 20’s let’s see. Is that right? Or almost 30. His later 20’s and a lot of the soldiers that were involved were young; 18. 19, 20, something like that. So, these are like children and many of them had never been anywhere or traveled anywhere, done anything. And so here they were thrown into a situation that was very stressful and different and so there were a lot of things that were problems. I remember my father talking about how he felt really badly for a lot of these soldiers because they were under constant pressure because of the military situation and they didn’t feel safe really anywhere they went. And he said that a lot of them did drugs, and were accused of raping civilians, shooting at each other. You can imagine, you know, they had weapons so they would get into fights. He had a number of assault cases and people trying to kill other soldiers and he said that some of them would try hard to get into trouble so they would be discharged and sent home even if it was in disgrace because they didn’t want to have to fight. So, here he is, my dad had been in the ROTC and went through officer school and was in the JAG Corps after he going to law school and so he had a lot of respect for the military and for doing his duty. And then, he was dealing with a lot of people who didn’t have his perspective at all they were forced by draft into the army and they didn’t want to be there. And, so his experience with the situation was not as a soldier firing weapons and being a part of a battle or anything like that. His was seeing the consequences of the people who were having to be in the army.

**Ben:** Do you know why he never saw action since he was such a good shot why didn’t he ever go out in the field?

**Jon:** You know, that’s agreat question Ben. I don’t know. He got this assignment and that was what he was told to do. Cause he was I guess he was in the infantry I mean he could have been, but he was an officer level person, so, he wasn’t an enlisted guy, so he was at the time I think a Captain? I’m thinking. And he ended up rising to the level of Lieutenant Colonel before he left the military, but I think at that time he was a captain. I think. And you know I don’t know I’m not sure if I even asked that question. But he never saw direct military action. He went through boot camp and basic training and all that stuff. I remember him telling me he was also trained to jump out of airplanes. He told me he jumped out of a plane in practice as a parachutist 49 times and he hated it 49 times.

**Ben:** Wow.

**Jon:** Yeah.

**Ben:** Is that what he would talk about, like, he messed up his hip from hitting the ground so hard?

**Jon:** Yep. Yeah. He said he hurt his back, he hurt his hip, because if you aren’t really careful you can hit the ground so hard that it will mess you up. Yeah but he hated it. He thought that was just horrible

**Ben:** Did you say what year he did basic training?

**Jon:** I’m going to guess ‘62?

**Ben:** So right after he got out of school?

**Jon:** Uh huh. I’m guessing. Yeah he got married in ’62. So it’s around that time. Because he finished that and they were in Fort Lee, Virginia, and then he went to law school with the military paying for it I think and after he went there, he joined the JAG Corps and was responsible for being a lawyer for the army.

**Ben:** And how long was he over there?

**Jon:** I want to say nine months.

**Ben:** Really just nine months?

**Jon:** Uh huh. I don’t think it was much longer than that. If it was a year, I would be shocked.

**Ben:** And was he relocated by the army? Did they decide they needed him elsewhere?

**Jon:** Yeah. Yes. He came back. Yes, that’s exactly right. Theyreposted him maybe back to Fort Lee. He, yeah, I think that’s right Ben.

**Ben:** And, what was he doing when he got back? Same thing just state side?

**Jon:** Same thing state side. Uh huh.

**Ben:** That’s pretty cool.You said you don’t know if he was there during the Tet Offensive or not?

**Jon:** I can’t remember if he was.He never talked about it, so I don’t get the impression that he was because I think he would’ve mentioned that. So, I don’t gather that he was. I can’t remember what year that was. I don’t think he was. I think he was back.

**Ben:** Did he ever talk about what the Vietnam civilians were like when he was there?

**Jon:** Yeah. So, when he was there, I’m guessing it was before the Tet Offensive there was a fairly large American presence where he was, and south Vietnam was threatened but not imminently threated because there was such a large military presence there. So, he talked about he just hung out on a base, I think, but he didn’t really talk about details about what it was like other than that he was working. He kept to his own he didn’t really wander around. He didn’t really think to do it much because there was a war going on.

**Ben:** Yeah, he really wouldn’t want to.

**Jon:** He really wouldn’t want to. So, I think he stayed on the base and worked on the base and would rarely go anywhere. Yeah, he wouldn’t have a reason to see much because of that and he was doing administrative stuff, so, unfortunately your subject here didn’t really get involved in fighting and I can’t tell you stories about fighting.

**Ben:** Do you have any specific stories about like conflicts he had to resolve between soldiers?

**Jon:** Yeah. I mean I remember him talking about, a lot of times you know as I mentioned before there were people who were trying to find a way to get out even if they were going to be discharged dishonorably and maybe even have some prison time. So, a lot of times, you know as an attorney on behalf of some of these people, they didn’t want to be found innocent. And he would be kind of amazed about how desperate people would get so, some of these people were committing crimes injuring or hurting civilians, stealing things, there were a lot of thefts. People injuring others on purpose over fights. But the main thing he would talk about, I didn’t get many specific, but he would talk about how a lot of them were working hard just to find a way out. They would use this as their way to get out. There were also some awful people. My dad would talk about how some of these people who were drafted into the military were not nice people. They came from very, very rough backgrounds. So, they might have been criminals in some petty way or had other issues before they got into the military and they just brought it with them. So, he just said you had to be really careful. Because some of these people you are fighting with might not be nicest people.

**Ben:** That's got to be such a weird divide how he was an officer and he was all for military work and then you have all these guys who got drafted and who don't want to be there.

**Jon:** Yeah. I know. Very different. I mean he understood it was a lot of pressure and it was hard for these folks.These soldiers were having to do a lot of stuff that was really unbearable. But he had to uphold the responsibilities that he had because he had to make sure that people were punished or defended depending on what his perspective was to make sure people didn’t do bad stuff. Otherwise, you can imagine, there would be this breakdown of control if you didn’t prevent people from committing crimes and hurting other people.

**Ben:** So, he was prosecuting and defending?

**Jon:** It depended. In the JAG Corps he was mainly defending soldiers is what his main responsibility was. So, he would get cases where some of them were alleged deserters and so sometimes people would disappear and not report, and they would be found. So, he mainly didn’t do prosecuting he was mainly defense council as part of the JAG Corps and that was his main responsibility.

**Ben:** Okay. Wow. That sounds pretty, pretty horrible.

**Jon:** I wouldn't think it would be fun I would not have enjoyed any of that. It would not have been fun.No.

**Ben:** Do you know if there was any conflict between him and the soldiers since he was in a position of power like that?

**Jon:** Oh gosh yes! I’m sure. I’m sure there were plenty of people who didn’t want to be there and even if he was trying to help them, I’m sure there was conflict. But, not the scary kind of being shot at.

**Ben:** No.

**Jon:** That was really it. He ended up staying in the military and then when he got out of active duty, he joined the National Guard and stayed part of the National Guard for years and years and rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and he did that for a long time. And then he practiced law as just a regular lawyer, but he stayed with the National Guard and was assigned to units as part of that. And then, and when he retired from the National Guard, he went into Government Service and did logistics for the military. That’s the rest of it.

**Ben:** Do you have any idea how he felt about the war? You said he had respect Army but what do he think about the conflict itself?

**Jon:** if I were guessing I was saying he would be more in other thought we were right to do it and we were protecting the south Vietnamese from the communist north and he would’ve been more or less in favor of the war. He would have seen it from a military view. That would be my guess

**Ben:** He said it would been necessary to stop the spread of communism. Do you know if he supported LBJ or not?

**Jon:** As the president supporting the war?

**Ben:** Yeah

**Jon**: I would think so yeah. He would have viewed him as the commander in chief, so he would’ve supported LBJ.

**Ben:** So, anything he said goes?

**Jon:** Probably. Yeah. If he was told to go and do stuff, he would’ve done it. He would’ve definitely had that view for sure.

**Ben:** I know he had that huge collection of World War II stuff did he have anything from the Vietnam war, or did he not really care about it that much?

**Jon:** He did not care that much. He had afew military items from the south Vietnamese military. Like some shoulder boards, I think a medal or two. Yeah, I remember seeing a few of those. I think he just collected those. I don’t think he got any of that while he was doing anything. I think he just collected them. He was not a big fan of stuff from that era.

**Ben:** Was it because of his experience or just?

**Jon:** I think it was his experience. It didn’t end up going the right way and I think he blamed politicians for not allowing the military to do what it actually needed to do so I don’t think he was very fond of stuff from that era.

**Ben:** Alright dad I think that’s about it.

**Jon:** Great.