Interview with Rick McCarty

Rick McCarty
Deborah Burdick

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnam_interviews

Recommended Citation
McCarty, Rick and Burdick, Deborah, "Interview with Rick McCarty" (2001). Interviews. 1.
http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnam_interviews/1

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Based on the Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.
Interviewee: Rick McCarty (1950-2012)
Interviewer: Deborah Burdick
Date: January 12, 2001
Location: 723 Walnut Street, Mt. Vernon, Indiana

Notes on use: For educational use only. This interview is published with the permission of Deborah Burdick, executrix of the estate of Rick McCarty. It was released by the La Salle University Connelly Library, Department of Special Collections in 2010. It was republished in 2015.

Related research material:
- The loss of innocence / by Rick McCarty. Mount Vernon, Ind. : Rick McCarty, [2001?]  
- [Vietnam War drawings] [picture] / Rick McCarty. 42 drawings.

Items preserved in the Department of Special Collections, Connelly, La Salle University

Abstract
In 1999, Rick McCarty of Mt. Vernon, Indiana, turned to art to heal the psychological wounds of his combat experience in Vietnam. Like many fellow veterans, McCarty suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition that causes victims to endure nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing, anger and hopelessness as a result of living through traumatic experiences such as war. Between 1999 and 2001, McCarty created a book of poetry and artwork entitled The Loss of Innocence, which depicts the events of his experiences near Bien Hoa in South Vietnam. McCarty served in the 92nd Engineer Battalion from 1971 to 1972. This interview was conducted by his friend and neighbor Deborah Burdick, an artist and a writer. McCarty himself was never trained in the arts. He was unable to read and write, and dictated his poems to his daughter to record. This interview originally appeared in the preface to The Loss of Innocence, and was adapted for the web by the La Salle University Connelly Library in 2010. It was republished in 2015 by the Department of Special Collections. This interview is only available in transcript form.

********************************************************************************
Deborah Burdick – Where did you get the idea to do a book about what happened to you in Vietnam?
Rick McCarty - It just come to me. Like some dead soldiers living in my head told me what to put down cause they wanted people to know the truth about Vietnam.
DB - Why the poetry and art?
RM – I don’t know. I guess all the pain and bullcrap built up in my head over all them years. When I went down (referring to a massive mental and substance abuse breakdown in 1999), I touched the face of the devil. When I came back up, all these words and pictures started pouring out of my head. It had to be said. That’s all I know.
DB – How do you feel emotionally when you’re making art about Vietnam?
RM – It hurts. I feel anger. More anger than any one man should endure. But a lot of the GI’s got this same stuff in their heads. You know? A lot seen more than what I seen. And when you can’t talk about nothing cause people didn’t want to listen when you got back years ago, it built up in their like a volcano that erupted.

You feel a lot of sadness. A lot of hurt. A lot of damn pain. When you come back to a country and didn’t get a welcome home, that’s when you never come home. You’re trapped between two countries. You got no where else to go.

DB – Does making the art help you feel better?

RM – Yeah. It helps some. It relieves the pressure. That’s about it.

DB – Do the Vietnam vets want their story told? Or do they want to let it die?

RM – Some wanted to tell their stories, but there ain’t nobody to tell it to. People didn’t want to hear it 30 years ago. Why would they want to hear it today. A lot of people know they did wrong when we got back. A lot of’em pushed us away. They didn’t want to hear the truth of what happened over there.

I’d say most vets want their story today. But they’re afraid to tell it. The government drilled it into our heads we’d go to prison if anything was said. Well, I’ve lived in prison for 30 years. I died inside 30 years ago. I want my story told. It’s not just my story. It’s the story of what happened to all of us.

DB – How many vets saw what you saw in Vietnam?

RM – Probably seventy percent saw what I saw or worse. What happened to me happened to a lot of GI’s over there. You ever seen a body blown up? See a headless man or woman? That’s what we seen in Vietnam.

DB – What is it like to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

RM – Like living in hell. Like punishing yourself for things we thought we did wrong. It’s having no life. Feeling dead inside. Having all the trust and love and hope drained out of you. That’s what it feels like.

DB – Are your nightmares and flashbacks severe?

RM – I’ve had ’em every single night for 30 years. Non-stop. I have flashbacks all day long. Medication eases ’em up a little bit, but I’ll never be cured of ’em. Anybody thinks it wasn’t hell over there, let ’em crawl inside my head and live for a week. I’ll scare ’em to death. Anybody wants to say I didn’t see what I saw, let ’em sleep in my bed at night. I’ll scare them to hell.

DB – What’s it like to have a flashback?

RM – Puts you right back on the spot where you were at. You lose contact with all other reality. Sometimes I go back in for 15 minutes. I see what I seen back then. I live it. I see the horror. The pain. Hear the screams and see the blood. See the shame. But I don’t see faces. Just black spaces of people. Like the night of the living dead.

I survive on two or three hours of sleep a night. But sometimes, when I’m with somebody, the nightmares slack down some. I get better sleep. When you’re alone, you deal with it worse, you know. Sleeping with a bet means the fight’s on for most of the night. I guess I don’t blame no woman for ever leaving me. I’ve had three wives. I don’t think none of them understood or really cared. None of them ever wanted to listen.
DB – You’ve had a lot of death in your life, haven’t you? You’ve lost a lot of people you loved and cared about, starting out when you were a kid, and continuing throughout your adult life. RM – Yeah. But I’m a survivor. What for, I don’t know. My therapist says she wants me to do more than survive. She wants me to live.

DB – What does she mean by that?

RM – Surviving means you live your life fighting your nightmares day by day. Hoping they’ll go away. Living means you enjoy your life. Which I can’t do. There ain’t nothing there for me. I live in Vietnam and I ain’t never coming home. But I’m learning in therapy how to deal with it day by day.

DB – If you’re having a good day, what’s that like for you?

RM – Surviving till the next. There’s not too much feeling left inside me.

DB – Are you ever able to enjoy yourself---to relax and have a good time?

RM – Very seldom. I do get a lot of peace from working out in the yard. But nothing seems to matter. I can’t figure out why I’m still here. A lot of other vets want to know why too. Why we’re still here. We haven’t figured that out yet.

DB – How do you think your art might help other people?

RM – It might make the parents of Vietnam bets understand what their sons and daughters went through. Why they’re alcoholics or drug users now. Why they quit caring about life. If it helps one bet, that’s fine. Maybe if he reads my book, he’ll tell his story too. Maybe if enough stories get out there, people will see we wasn’t in the wrong. Maybe it’ll make a vet get some help. Quit drinking and get in therapy like I did.

DB – Do you think more vets are coming forward now to tell their story? Or do you think a lot of guys will take it with them when they die.

RM – I think a lot of guys will take it with them. It’s been in their heads too damn long. They wanted to talk about it years ago, but nobody would listen. I blame the ones that criticized us. The ones that threw the eggs. Threw the names. The ones that branded us baby killers.

DB – How has fighting in Vietnam affected your relationships with people?

RM – I don’t trust ’em. I let ’em stab me in the back. I pick the wrong women for punishment to me. I don’t drink no more, but I hang around bars cause that’s what I’m used to. Cause I ain’t got a life out there. That’s why a lot of vets hang in bars. A lot of people say, well, it’s just an old drunk. But they don’t realize that old drunk’s probably a vet.

DB – So what draws you to the bar scene?

RM – Anger. Hate. Bullshit. It’s what we figure we deserve. Trust for other people just ain’t there no more. I ain’t never coming home cause I won’t let myself. I feel like I deserve where I’m at. It’s another punishment for what happened over there.

DB – So when will the punishment end?

RM – When I die. That’s when I’ll rest in peace.
A little over a year ago, a replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall came to Evansville. At that time, your art work was seen by nearly 50,000 people visiting the Wall and the veterans art show. How did that experience affect you?

RM – I saw a lot of pain in the people. They still don’t understand what happened over there. Some of them cried when they saw the art. At first, I just wanted revenge. I wanted them to feel the pain I feel every day. But then, I didn’t want it no more, you know? But I’m glad they brought the Wall here. Because people just want to forget. Looking at all them names on the wall, there’s no way they could.

DB – Do you feel any sense of kindness or forgiveness for the way people treated you and other vets when you came back from Vietnam?

RM – Not really. They can’t change what’s done. I can’t get back those years of my life that I destroyed. But I guess I don’t really blame the people. I blame myself.

DB – Your very first drawing was a simple sketch on a napkin, done when you were drunk on rum. Over the next few months, you got sober and did more and more drawings about Vietnam. You wrote poetry to go with the pictures. All of this by someone who never drew a picture before age 48 and who can barely read and write. What was this great outpouring of art and poetry all about?

RM – Understanding. I wanted people to understand. But, not at first. At first, my art was never to be shown to nobody. Nobody was to hear my poems. It was private---my own private war. Now, I hope my pictures and poems help people understand what really went on in Vietnam.

DB – When you show your art to other vets, what is their reaction to it?

RM – A lot of them tell me they wish they could do it. Wish they could draw their own story. They tell me a lot of what’s in my book happened to them too. A few say they seen worse. Most get tears in their eyes when they look at the pictures. They tell me to keep telling the truth about Vietnam. To keep telling the story. The book wasn’t done just for me. It ain’t mine. It’s for all of us. For all Vietnam vets. Maybe my book will help one mother or father understand what their son or daughter went through over there.

DB – How do you feel when you see other people responding to the book?

RM – Sad. Not revenge no more. Just sad. Looking at the pictures, they’re seeing what I seen over there. They’re shocked. They can’t believe it. But it don’t matter if they believe it or not. If they want to criticize it, that’s fine. They pictures weren’t drawn to make me a hero, cause I’m not. There’s real heroes out there that are dead. A lot are vets that’s committed suicide since the end of the war. Every day, another vet kills himself cause he can’t take the pain no more.

DB – Do you think the POWS and MIAS are still over there?

RM – I think for sure. But I don’t think they’d even want to come home now. I think their bodies and minds are dead. I think they’ve lived a cruel painful life for 30 years. They probably forgot what English sounds like. That’s what I think.

DB – How has going to the Vet Center in Evansville for therapy helped you? Would you recommend counseling for other vets?

RM – Yeah. It helped cause I got a lot of things out of my head that needed to be said a long time ago. I’ve got a little bit of trust for Sarah, my therapist. She’s been good to me. The medications I get from there help me go on every day. A lot of vets ain’t going to go for help, but I’m glad I went. I have to
regrets about it. But I do think (referring to veterans disability benefits) the government’s going to make you keep fighting and begging for what’s yours. Keep trying to make you prove what happened. Make vets struggle for what belongs to him. Cause most of our records have been destroyed.

DB – What does your therapist say about all this art and writing you’re doing? Does she believe it’s helping relieve your PTSD symptoms?

RM – Sarah says she ain’t never seen art like I do. She thinks I ought to keep on drawing. That it’s helping to ease the pressure in my head. She wants me to draw all kinds of stuff. Not just about Vietnam. I know when I don’t draw, that’s when it hurts. It’s like I got a million more pages to draw. Like I got a million more poems in me.

DB – You’ve said you don’t think of yourself as an artist. Why not? Other people think of you as one.

RM – I never drew anything till I was 48 years old. To me, it’s kid’s art.

DB – When you sit down to draw a picture, do you know what you want to say in the drawing? Do you plan a picture out in advance?

RM – No. When I draw, it ain’t me. I zombie out from everything. Block everything off. I see what I seen in the nightmares I dream. The drawing draws its own self. I put my pencil to the paper and it’s there. There’s somebody else drawing it besides myself. Dead soldiers maybe. I don’t know where the art comes from. It just comes.

DB – I know you sometimes like to draw while parked on the banks of the Ohio River. At other times, you draw sitting on your front porch or at your dining table. At what time of day do you like to draw and what kind of a mood do you have to be in?

RM – I draw in the mornings after bad nightmares. In the afternoons when I’m in outer space. I don’t draw in the evenings. It’s all built up too much. Whenever it hits me, I pick up my paper and do it. Drawing eases the pain. It gets things out on paper that I really want to say, but have a hard time saying. Trying to find peace is what it’s all about.

DB – You barely read or write, yet you’ve produced hundreds of poems. Many of them express the pain of your Vietnam experience and all were written after you turned 48 years old. How did you suddenly become a poet?

RM – You’re born with it. You can’t learn it in college. It’s in you or it’s not. My poems just come to me. I could do fifty a day if I wanted to. I scribble down words, but I’m the only one who can read ’em. I don’t spell too good. It’s like I got my own shorthand. After I write ’em down, I tell ’em to somebody else and they recopy ’em for me to go with my art.

Sometimes I’ll be driving down the highway and a poem’ll come to me. I pull off to the side of the road and scribble it down as best as I can. It all comes from deep down inside. It’s been hidden there for years, I guess. It stayed there till the anger come out during that breakdown. Then it all poured out.

DB – Do you ever give our art to your friends? Do people ever ask to buy it?

RM – I give it to some friends. I ain’t never sold none. I could have, but it’s my nightmares. It wasn’t never meant to be sold. I guess if they wanted to buy a piece and I thought they cared and was real sincere about it., I might sell ’em one. But only if they was going to put it to good use. Not make a freak show out of it.
DB – What kind of value would you like to see people place in your art? It’s definitely about a period in American history.

RM – Healing. It’s about healing. There’s a few boys tell me their dad died in Vietnam. They wonder why. I can’t give ‘em that answer. My book makes ‘em understand a little bit more what he went through. The book shows people, if their son is dead, he’s not going through what other Vietnam vets are going through today. He don’t have to live day by day fighting a war he can’t win at the end. If he’s dead, he’s at peace.

DB – Do you feel more respect and acceptance now by people who’ve seen you art displayed at the Wall, the local library and the high school?

RM – Some people understand a little bit more about happened in Vietnam and about the pain vets are in today. Some still don’t believe it. Some will never understand. Some don’t think the art should be shown. They just want to forget.

All I want is for people to understand what their sons and daughters went through. Why their sons or daughters are drunks or dopeheads today. Why they quit caring. Why they ain’t the same boy that left home for Vietnam.

DB – How do you feel about your art being used at the high school to teach kids about the Vietnam War?

RM – I feel good about it. I wished all vets could do it. Could draw what happened. But they can’t. A lot have encouraged me to keep on drawing. Tellin’ it like it is. I draw what I seen in my dreams for 30 years. What I see in the middle of the night when I wake up in the closet. When I run through my house and tear the covers clean off my bed. When I punish myself and can’t understand why. Drawing my nightmares relieves a lot of the pain in my head.

DB – You tell your own story, but have other vets asked you to draw theirs for them?

RM – I can’t do it. I can only draw what I seen. I can’t get mixed up in my pain and another guy’s pain at the same time. Cause I’ll go into his nightmares. But a lot of vets tell me they seen what I seen. So I’m not just doing it for me.

DB – How many of your five brothers fought in Vietnam?

RM – Three of my brothers. There was five sons out of my family that was in the military. Four of us went to Vietnam. My dad was in World War II and fought in the Pacific. So he knows about war. My momma always said I wasn’t the same boy when I come back. Now she can look at my drawings and understand what happened to me over there. Same with my daughters, Amy and Katie.

DB – Tell me what happened when you came home from Vietnam in 1972?

RM – The military treated us like cattle when we got off the plane in California. Put us in warehouses for processing out. There was fifty or sixty hippies lined up on the other side of the fence, screaming and hollering and throwing stuff. They were yelling we were baby killers. When we got off the plane, nobody that cared welcomed us home. Nobody give a shit.

We was supposed to get a steak when we got home, but there wasn’t none. The GI’s that never went to Vietnam ate ‘em. Instead of a steak, we got a greasy old hamburger. When they served us that, everybody stood up and walked out.
There was a lot of sad faces when we got back. None of us knew which way to turn. A lot of us walked home cause we’d used our money for booze and dope. Like I did. Nobody would give a G.I. a ride. They was scared of us cause we was branded baby killers.

The protesters started that baby killer bullshit. How would they feel if a five or six year-old girl come up to ’em wrapped in grenades? Would they put a gun to her? Or welcome her and let her blow the hell out of ’em. We wanted to live too. Same as the people back here.

I’ve lived 30 years with the brand of baby killer on me. Same as a lot of other vets. It’s a name that can’t be erased from our minds.

DB – How were you treated after you returned home for Vietnam?

RM – I went to the American Legion not long after I got back. One of the World War II vets there said we bled yellow blood in Vietnam. Said it wasn’t a war. Said we was cowards. I walked out and never went back. That sticks in your head, you know? When 58,000 Americans die, that’s a war. Not a policy action.

A few times, people in town spit at me and other vets and called use baby killers. It happened to me and a friend of mine at Dairy Queen. A girl spit at us and my friend went after her. I had to pull him off of her. That kind of thing happened a few times till I moved out to the country to get away from people. Said to hell with it all. I couldn’t trust nobody. I lived out of town for 16 years.

But it wasn’t just me. All over the country, G.I.’s were coming home and getting spit on. All of us was treated like shit. After a few years, people never asked me about the war. Half of ’em didn’t even know I was there. Half didn’t even give a damn. But I felt better being alone. I wish I could’ve trusted people. But they turned their backs on me. I wish they’d have welcomed me when I come home.

DB – Tell about the Fourth of July parade that was held in your hometown a few years after you got back.

RM – I walked in it with a dozen or so other vets. People clapped when the World War I, World War II and Korean War vets walked by. But when the Vietnam vets walked by, they was quiet. They didn’t clap. It was like they was in a daze. It was like they didn’t know what to say. I walked out of the parade and didn’t go back.

DB – For years, you managed your family’s landfill business. You’ve said you were a workaholic, even before you went to Vietnam.

RM – I’ve worked hard all my life. And yeah, I always worked before and after school when I was a kid. But not like I worked when I come back from Vietnam.

DB – How was it different when you came back?

RM – When I was a kid, I worked for hours before school and for hours after. We was real poor and if I wanted anything, I had to pay for it myself. When I got back from Vietnam, I worked twelve to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week to kill the pain. To forget what I seen. But it never worked. My mind was always in Vietnam. Always fighting the war. It don’t quit, you know? You can’t zap it away. It’s always there. You just got to forget it, but you can’t. It’ll stay with us till we die.

My therapist says I’ve seen more than most humans could ever imagine. And I was just nineteen when I seen it. While kids at home was out having a good time, I was seeing stuff that should never have been seen. Spent my twenty-first birthday in Vietnam. Where did they spend theirs? When they went to bed,
what’d they see in their dreams? I don’t think most of ’em that stayed here could have survived what I survived.

DB – Is there anything you want to say?

RM – I’d like to say it’s very painful not to be able to get close to your sons and daughters. You can’t hug ’em like you’d like to. You feel dead inside. You can’t get close to your family because it feels like if you do, they’ll go away like everyone else in your life has. So you hold back from loving them cause you don’t want to hurt ’em. And you don’t want to get hurt. It’s just hard to show your feelings toward them.

I’d also like to say, if there’s ever another war, I hope the people of the United States will be a little bit more sympathetic to its soldiers. Welcome them home and try to understand what it was like over there. Just welcome them home and let ’em know it. That’s all I have to say.

(END)