This is a formal interview with Charles Gietzen, a Vietnam Veteran, by Lynn Van Mullem on November 7, 1973 in the Library building on San Diego State University Campus.

L.V.M.: Alright Charles can we start by getting a little of your family background?

C.G.: Well I'm forty-seven years old, born in Nebraska, of a middle class family. My father was a dentist and I'm the youngest child, I had a brother much older than I was, twenty-six years older than I was, who at the death of my father became my guardian. My dad died when I was five so I was raised by relatives, eventually at the age of thirteen or fourteen, I guess it was, I ended up with my brother as my guardian and lived with him until I entered the Marine Corp.

L.V.M.: What made you decide to pick the Marine Corp?

C.H.: Well I went into the Marine Corp during the war, in 1943. My original thought had been to join the Navy, but my brother had refused to sign a minority form; minority enlistment require the permission of your parents and he refused to do that. This was in 1942 when I wanted to go in, so in 1943 when I was eighteen and of draft age I went down to register for the draft and volunteered for the Marine Corp at the same time. They were the only service open. I couldn't get into the Coast Guard, I couldn't get into the Navy, so I went into the Marine Corp.

L.V.M.: Why did your brother as your legal guardian refuse to sign?
C: Well he was looking out for me, I can appreciate his position. I was only seventeen years old and just a kid to him, of course I was a kid and although the war was on and it was the patriotic thing to do (to go in the service), he still wanted to protect me as long as he could.

L: Can you tell me what years you were in Vietnam?
C: I went there in July of '69 and came back in August of '70.
L: Where were you stationed?
C: At Monkey Mountain which is in Da Nang in the Northern section.
L: What was your rank while in Vietnam?
C: I was master gunnery sargeant.
L: Can you tell me a little bit about your military duties while you were there?
C: I was a communicator, and being a senior enlisted man, I was in a Marine air controlled squadron. Which is a unit that has to do primarily with air traffic control. As the senior communicator in the organization, I was the operations chief. That has to do primarily with communication. At one time, our sargeant major was evacuated for health problems and I was a casualty, so I was made the acting sargeant major—for a short period of time. That was simply because I was the senior enlisted man.
L: Can you tell me why you went to Vietnam?
C: Well of course I was a professional military man, it was inevitable that eventually I would get a tour of duty there.
I requested the tour, I'd been stuck here at Marine Corp Recruit Depot teaching in communications electronics school battalion for a considerable period of time and I simply wanted to get over there. I didn't want to get left out.

L: What was your training like by the Marine Corp before you went over, was there any preparation or introduction to Vietnam?

C: In what sense?

L: Well in your field of electronics or in say knowing a little bit about Vietnam or what's behind...

C: You mean the political situation, language, that kind of business? Yes, I...now as far as technical training there was nothing peculiar to Vietnam about the equipment or about the exercise of my particular expertise in communication, there was nothing new there. We were given a three day indoctrination, this on the West coast was taken care of at Camp Pendleton. The indoctrination consisted primarily of the war situation. We were given some rudimentary introduction to the language, you know the common terms. We were also given the normal warnings given to any military man going into a foreign situation like this about our conduct.

L: Can you give me an example of some of those warnings?

C: Well it had to do primarily with our relationship with Vietnamese civilians and our counterparts with the military. What I say is standard warning, it's really kind of common sense stuff.
That you are a guest, a visitor in the country, you are not going there as a conqueror. A man in the military especially an American soldier in foreign countries, you know we've had considerable success in World War II, Korea, and the First World War. Military men tend to think of themselves... they're very self centered in their approach toward foreign nationals. In my own experience, I was involved in a Japanese occupation, I was also in China after the war, and where you are the power, the authority, you tend to get a rather exaggerated sense of your own importance. The indoctrination was pointed along those lines. We were there as guests, we were there as military--to militarily assist the Vietnamese.

L: Well since you got a little bit of the political background of the Vietnam war, what were your views before you went over?

C: Oh, I supported the war 100%. I thought we had... of course I took a professional view, somewhat similar to what Chesty Puller (Lt. General in the United States Marine Corp), you know that we heard in that tape that Dr. Mellon did the other day. (Charles is referring to a recording heard in Dr. Mellon's oral history class.) I thought that was kind of funny cause I've heard Chesty Puller use this term, "Don't knock it, it's the only war we have;" that is a very professional viewpoint. I supported the war, I hadn't really given any deep thought to the political situation, the unpopularity of the war had really kind of escaped me.
L: It hadn’t really begun to get into a full force by then either.

C: Well ‘69 there was a lot of agitation. Sixty-nine if my memory is correct, let me see now, sixty-nine or seventy, I think it was while I was in Vietnam that Kent State business took place. And there was a tremendous amount of agitation on the campuses.

So I was aware of all the political dissent but I didn’t lend any credence to it.

L: Well what about your view of the Vietnam war after you had been there for say six months, did it change?

C: Very little.

L: Very little? You still stayed on the side of the war?

C: Well I certainly had no doubts whatsoever about the correctness of the Marine Corp’s involvement in that war. You know that was the determination, the political determination that had been made by the commander in chief, by the commandant of the Marine Corp and the chief of naval operations, I certainly wouldn’t question them. The things that disturbed me about the Vietnam War was the way it had affected discipline in the Marine Corp. The character of the Marine Corp, but not the war itself.

L: From the interviews that I have done a lot of the men have complained, well not necessarily complained but have talked about how their religion had changed. Now I understand you were on Monkey Mountain which was considered a rocket safe area?

C: That’s right.

L: Right?
C: Very secure area.

L: In a situation like that your religion would not basically change, am I correct?

C: Well I don't think you're going to find anything very meaningful about me about religion. I was raised by a family that had very strong religious feelings, and I was a very active church goer up to the age of seventeen or eighteen when I left home. And then my religion deteriorated along with my morals (laughing). Although I am a strong believer in religious training for children I am not a member of a church, I am not an active member in any church. Due to the basic tenants of christianity but I certainly am not active in a religious sense. And sitting on top of Monkey Mountain in the fog for thirteen months there was certainly no strain whatsoever of physical danger.

L: If we put you in a hypothetical situation and say you were facing combat do you think that would affect your religious views? Being shot at...like all day?

C: Well I don't know. The last time I got shot at in anger was in Korea in 1952. And I certainly...my views then I don't think were much different then they are right now.

L: Earlier you mentioned that you knew while in Vietnam that there was alot of tension about the war here in the States. Did you discuss this with other officers or other men that you knew on Monkey Mountain?
C: One of our favorite topics of conversation was what the nuts back in the States were doing. Ah, you know the papers were full of it and of course it was very heavily propagandized in the military newspapers. The military was considerably upset, still is, about the lack of support by some segments of the American public. You know for the war, and the really strong anti-military movements that really got tremendous impetus out of the Vietnam War. And of course that's... professionals look at that as a direct threat—they still do. So it was one of our favorite topics of conversation.

L: So then it was very often discussed?

C: Oh yes!

L: Well what about Kent State and let's say the burning of Bank of America? Now I know that was in the "Stars and Stripes," (military newspaper) how did that affect the men over there?

C: Well I had ambivalent feelings about this Kent State affair. I was horrified at the thought of kids getting shot on campus. That was just absolutely unbelievable. No matter what the provocation. And I was contemptuous of the National Guard as any professional military man is. The National Guard is a bag of horns always has been always will be—militarily speaking (rephrasing rapidly) speaking in a military sense. They're hardly any better trained than the rabble that they are suppose to be controlling in these riots, supposed riot controlled situations like Kent State. And yet on the other side of the
I certainly had no sympathy, at the time, absolutely no sympathy with the aims of the rioting students. Now I think I was sensitive enough to the free speech issue, even at that time. I was certainly sensitive enough then to feel these kids had a right to assemble, they had a right to let their grievances be known. I wasn't sympathetic to the rock throwing bit, you know that kind of nonsense...

L: It's hard to be.

C: ...But I was absolutely horrified and I think almost without exception my associates felt the same thing, you know, killing kids on campus. Unarmed kids whose only weapons were to throw rocks. There's just absolutely no excuse whatsoever.

L: Well do you think these sort of riots on the campuses added added tension in Vietnam?

C: Oh undoubtedly! Undoubtedly. They focused the really strange feelings that we had, to be in a foreign country, in a war situation, and to realize there was such fantastic turmoil back here in the States over this war. The lack of support, it really gives a military man a very strange feeling to have the feeling that what you are doing perhaps has some illegitimacy about it.

L: In other words you felt pretty much left alone?

C: Well I wouldn't use that term "left alone." Because we also had good old Barry Goldwater and all of the hawks in Congress and a great segment of the American population. You know the hard hat marches in Washington D.C. and all that kind of business. We tended to identify with that segment of the population. They supported, they think what we were doing here is right.
L: Do you feel like the American public really didn't understand the issues in Vietnam?

C: Well, that is a very... I don't know. I'd have to make a very broad determination of that. I don't know if I can project my thinking back then because my thinking has changed so radically since then. But I suppose probably at that time I thought the Barry Goldwaters and the Strom Thurmonds and the military people, the supporters of the military were the right thinkers and the radicals were the wrong thinkers. Well, I've changed a hundred and eighty degrees on that thinking now. But then I'm pretty sure that I felt that the radicals certainly had the right to voice their dissent, but that their dissent was based on erroneous information. I supported the war, I really did.

L: Racial tensions were suppose to be a severe problem in Vietnam. Can you tell me a little bit about the black versus white confrontation or just minority problems?

C: Yes we had a great deal of problems even in the unit that I was in, where we really didn't have any pressure on us in a combat sense. And of course the Marine Corp prides themselves on discipline and I think we had a fairly well disciplined organization, it was a typical Marine organization, we had good control. But we did have a lot of tension between blacks and whites, the kind of tension I had never seen before, in any Marine organization I've been in.

L: What do you think made it more tense?

C: Well the first blacks had become a lot more active, the black movement had become a lot more active. And blacks in the
service in uniform became more militant about the civil rights issue about the black movement. Just as they did in civilian, it carried from the civilian into the military. Most of the blacks, the majority of the blacks we had in our organization were young. We had one black officer during my tour there, a young flyer, and to see... black officers are still a real curiosity in the Marine Corp, there just are not very many of them. There are a lot of black enlisted Marines, the majority of them are short termers, do maybe three or four years and out. There are not too many professionals.

L: Why do you think there aren't too many professionals?

C: Well in the first place... well historically we didn't have black Marines until 1943. The first black Marine ever ever was in 1943. And blacks were not encouraged in a professional sense until, I would say probably in the early sixety's. I know one black Marine very well, a sargeant major, Sam Howell. Sam was probably one of the most senior master sargeants in the Marine Corp when he was promoted to sargeant major. He had been eminently qualified for promotion for years! He'd been in the Marine Corp for almost twenty-five years. And had been a master sargeant for nine or ten, but the Marine Corp simply could not bring itself, the hierarchy couldn't bring itself, to promote him to sargeant major. I think it was kind of unthinkable. The civil rights push that started in the late fifty's and late sixety's slopped over into the military and as a result there were alot more promotions into the senior enlisted
L: Did you find that most minorities stuck together, like into groups?

C: Well most minorities, there is only one minority in the Marine Corp and that's the blacks. And that's because of the color differentiation, you can't identify a jew, you can't identify a... well name some minorities.

L: A Chicano.

C: A Chicano. Well you can usually identify a Chicano, but there are not many Chicanos in the Marine Corps. I don't know why that is, but there are not.

L: What about orientals?

C: Very few. There are a few Samoans but they're treated differently than the orientals. The Samoans have traditionally been kind of they...they are like the Phillippinos in the Navy. They are kind of looked on as the pet, the pet gook. (Laughing)

L: Can you tell me...

C: I don't mean that in a derogatory sense. One of my best friends is a guy by the name of Yoyono Afualo, I've known him years and years and he's just a marvelous guy. But he's ah, well he's different, he's a Samoan. Samoans are like nobody else in this world.

L: I know what you mean by the Navy having pets of the Phillippinos.

C: Yes, you know Phillippinos are traditionally the stewards in the Navy. They run the officers ward room. And that's kind of the way the Marine Corp looked at Samoans. They're just great to have around.
L: You said that there was a lot of racial tension on Monkey Mountain in that safe area. Well, do you think that the tension was greater or less in a combat area?

C: Less.

L: How do you explain that...

C: Well there is a cohesiveness between guys in say in the same fire squad, in the same fire team, in the same squad, or in the same platoon. When you are under fire you depend on that guy next to you—you don't give a damn what color he is. In fact there are some very close relationships between blacks and whites under those circumstances. Now when you take a unit out of that situation and move it back to the rear area, where there is racial tension all the time, where you don't have that camarade due to the danger, then you will find a difference in the relationship. Blacks in Vietnam were really very clanish, they tended to hang together. Of course the whites, I'm sure to a black it seems the whites are clanish because when you look around you and see nothing but white faces, any group tends to be a clan. Whites of course when they see more than two blacks together you --look at that...

L: That's a clan, too.

C: That's a clan. Stick togetherness business it's very suspicious. I think that's kind of built in a white American. You're training is kind of pushed that way.

L: Do you mean we're trained to go into clans or to see clans?