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Louis Cooke Memoir

C775. Cooke, Louis b. 1946

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 45 mins., 9 pp.

Cooke, Vietnam veteran, briefly discusses war experience in Vietnam, home life after the war, and work for veteran's organizations: Vietnow, "Last Patrol", and others.

Interview by Gary L. Maple, 1988

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Gary L. Maple for the Oral History Office on October 20, 1988. Margaret Reeder transcribed the tapes and Kay Johansen edited the transcript. Louis Cooke reviewed the transcript.

Louis Cooke, born on August 19, 1946, is a disabled American veteran of the Vietnam War. Although he is rated at one hundred percent disability, he has been able to overcome his situation and take a positive attitude about his life. Mr. Cooke has consistently worked since June of 1969, has been an active supporter of various veteran organizations, established the Vietnow organization in Sangamon County and has participated in five walks of the "Last Patrol" in support of Vietnam veterans and their rights.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Louis Cooke, Springfield, Illinois, October 20, 1988.

Gary L. Maple, Interviewer.

A: I was born August 19, 1946 in Springfield, Illinois. My father's name was Louis C. Cooke. My mother's name was Ruth Cooke. My dad was a carpenter all his life. My mother is deceased and he remarried Margaret and she was an office worker. I went to grade school at St. Aloysius and from there I went to High School at Griffin. After that I spent one semester at Springfield College in Illinois. I started to work at Franklin Life for eight months and was drafted into the Marine Corps.

Q: Now you go ahead and dwell on Vietnam for awhile, tell us what happened when you went to boot camp and all that other good stuff.

A: Well I went to boot camp, January 26, 1966.

Q: Where did you go to boot camp?

A: San Diego.

Q: How many weeks was boot camp?

A: Eight weeks.

Q: Did you go directly to Vietnam from boot camp or did you come home?

A: I went directly from boot camp to RTR and was home on leave for thirty days. I went back to Camp Pendleton for two or three weeks. Then from there I went to Vietnam by boat.

Q: Where did you land when you got to Vietnam?

A: Da Nang.

Q: Did you stay in a building at Da Nang for awhile or were you just shipped to your unit? What unit did you go to?

A: I went to Machine Gun training for two weeks and from there I was an expert in machine guns. Then I went to my outfit and was on a boat for thirty days. G Company, 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines and 2nd Platoon. I stopped in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Q: You stopped in Hawaii before you went to Vietnam?

A: Yes.

Q: After you joined the unit in Vietnam what was your first operation?

A: I was over there for twelve operations, my first operation against the Viet Cong in Da Nang. Another operation against the Viet Cong in Da Nang it took place October 12th to October 28th, in 1966. I participated in an operation called Phu Rai from 29, October to 26, December still in 1966. Then the operations against the Viet Cong from 26th December until the 23rd of January, 1967. Then I participated in an operation against the VC in Da Nang 23, January to the 7th of March 1967. From there I participated in an operation Prairie II from 8th of March, 1967 until the 18th of March 1967. Then participated in the operation Prairie III from the 19th of March until the 31st of March, 1967. Then I participated in the operation Canyon from the 6th of March to the 12th of March, 1967. From there I participated in an operation against the VC in operation Big Horn the 13th of April to the 21st of April, 1967. I participated in an operation Shawnee from the 22nd of April to the 2nd of May, 1967 when I got injured. I was hit. The 2nd of May 1967 I went to USS Repose and I was in there sixty-three days unconscious and nearly lost my life two times.

Q: Where were you wounded?

A: In the skull, half of my head was completely gone.

Q: On the left or right side?

A: Left side. Half of my head is plastic plate and it affected my right side. I can't use my right arm and my right leg is paralyzed. I went to Great Lakes Naval Hospital for sixteen months. I couldn't move a muscle. The doctor would ask me a question and I would have to blink once for no and twice for yes.

Q: You spent all thirteen months at Great Lakes Air Naval Station?

A: Great Lakes Naval Hospital.

Q: How many operations did you have?

A: Two or three.

Q: You are rated, right now, at one hundred percent disability is that correct?

A: Yes.

Q: You're still working though?

A: Yes I am.

Q: You take great pride in that and I think a lot of people have a lot of pride for you that you are still working. When you came back from Vietnam and got out of the hospital did you reflect back on your service in Vietnam then and how did it affect you when you directly

got out? Did you directly go back to work or did you stay out for a few years?

A: I went back to work in June of 1969.

Q: And you've been working ever since?

A: Yes. I'll take that back. My wedding date was June the 8th of 1968. I was married to, well I don't want to get into that.

Q: I was medivaced out of Vietnam on June the 6th 1968. You were back a long time before me. Did you get married when you got back from Vietnam?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: What was your wife's name?

A: Karole.

Q: Did you have any children?

A: Four.

Q: Boys or girls?

A: Two boys and two girls.

Q: How old are they now?

A: Rhonda is sixteen. Rachelle is thirteen. Nicholas is eleven and Nathan is eight.

Q: Did you have any problems when you first got out? I mean you first got married and did you have any problems after you got married and settled down and still working? How was your life then?

A: It was okay.

Q: Do you belong to any major organizations? Any veteran's organizations when you first got out?

A: No. Well I belong to the DAV. My dad was a World War II vet and one day I got into the DAV.

Q: You could have been a member anyway because you are a disabled vet? You got yourself into the DAV. He influenced you into joining the organization is what he did?

A: Yes.

Q: Most veterans had problems with drugs. I know I did for awhile when I first got back and drinking. Did you have any of those problems?

A: Drinking.

Q: How is your life now? What are you involved in? What have you been involved in the last four or five years let me put it that way?

A: Okay, the DAV, the VFW, Last Patrol, Vietnam Veterans of Illinois, Marine Corp League, Vietnow, Patriots, American Legion, Third Marine Division Association, Military Order of the Purple Hearts.

Q: I understand you helped organize that organization, or start that organization?

A: Yes.

Q: Any other organizations you had a direct influence in and you helped get started? I can think of one more. You helped start Vietnow here in Sangamon County?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have any involvement in the Illinois Vietnam Veterans Memorial?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: What did you do? I know you had a lot to do with the fund raising and stuff like that.

A: Well I sold T-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, and I was involved in a fund raiser in Mt. Zion.

Q: In 1986?

A: Yes, in 1986 that's where I met Kathy.

Q: That's your present wife?

A: Yes, a good lady. I got married to her March 19th of 1988.

Q: Can you think of anybody that has had a great influence over you in the last few years of your life since you've been back from Vietnam? Anybody special that's had an influence over you?

A: Lot's of people. You want me to drop some names. Vern Wagner, Danny Rybczyk.

Q: Who was he?

A: He's from Peoria.

Q: What does he do, is he a Vietnam veteran?

A: Yes. After I came back they were all brothers and sisters to me Vietnam vets. Vern Wagner, Danny Rybczyk from Peoria, and from Decatur, Charles, Lucille, Roger, Sanai Walker, Bob Walker and one other guy, Jerry Rothwell.

Q: How have these people had influence over you? What have they done to influence you?

A: They helped me by just being around, just good solid friends. Like Roger Walker.

Q: Where is he from?

A: Decatur. There's a lot of people from Decatur. Bob Wilson, he's from Rochester.

Q: I understand that you are involved in a new thing right now that's going well and there are a lot of people involved in this. Won't you tell us about it? The thing called the "Last Patrol."

A: The "Last Patrol", is a special organization working to help release POWs and MIAs still in South Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Q: What does the "Last Patrol" do?

A: Well the "Last Patrol", marches. We've been on five marches; two walks from Decatur to Springfield, Springfield to Bloomington, from Springfield, Illinois Vietnam Memorial to Chicago and I was on a march from Decatur to Washington D. C. Me and Kathy started the march and walked. We got to Tuscola, Illinois and from there I went home and had to go back to work. During that time I was in the hospital as an outpatient for my back and another march was from Springfield, Illinois Veterans Memorial, we started out from the Veterans Memorial and walked to Chicago.

Q: How long did that take you?

A: Ten days. Twenty-five miles a day I personally walked forty-five miles and twenty-five a day.

Q: That's a pretty big accomplishment. Did you get pretty sore?

A: Well yes. My right and left leg bothers me, my right ankle bothers me but I didn't get any blisters.

Q: Okay, what are your plans for the future, what's your outlook for the future? Do you plan anything in the near future for yourself?

A: No.

Q: Day by day?

A: Yes.

Q: Vietnam has affected you in a positive way, would you say that?

A: Yes. I am bitter about the refugees that came over here and got a better paying job . . .

Q: You think they were penalized, penalized is that what you said?

A: The Vietnamese refugees that have come over, we take them in. And can't feed our own people.

Q: Yes. Is there anything else you want to say?

A: I pray to God the POWs and the MIAs come back home.

Q: I'm going to ask you one more question. How do you feel about the other Vietnam veterans in the area? I mean how they are being treated, you know some Vietnam veterans aren't getting proper treatment from the VA. How do you feel about that?

A: We walked for veteran's rights up to Chicago, judicial review, agent orange, PTSD and MIAs, POWs. We want it for all veterans. Okay, I get hundred percent disability. I'm fighting the VA now and if we had judicial review I could get it done faster. I want the homeless veterans to find a home. (tape stopped)

Q: This is an addition. Cooke had one more thing to say and he wanted to add this on to the tape.

A: Okay, I was hit, I don't know when I got a missile. They tell me it was at 881 and I don't remember how it happened. Practically the whole platoon got wiped out on hill 881 the 2nd of May 1967. Half my head was gone and I had lots of wounds: my back, my left eye, left arm, my right side, my buttocks, my left leg and thigh area and my foot. I got divorced in 1983 and March 19 I got remarried to a lovely, lovely lady. I thank God I'm here to tell about it.

End of Tape