

Oral History Program

OH-456

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Oral History Program

BRUCE LEE MATHIEU

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**BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-HAWAII
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Behavioral and Social Sciences Division
Laie, Hawaii 96762**

BRUCE LEE MATHIEU

INTERVIEW NO: OH-456

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 18, 1998

INTERVIEWER: Vanz Steimle

SUBJECT: Honor Betrayed
(Que Son Valley 1/6 198th Americal May 1968)

INTRODUCTION

Bruce Lee Mathieu served on two tours in the Vietnam War from March 1968 to August 1969. He was in the first battalion sixth infantry, 198th infantry brigade and was attached to the Americal division.

In this interview, Bruce shares his experiences while in the war and what he has seen happen while in battle. He is still haunted by the memories of his experiences at the war. He has had two heart attacks and doctors have told him it's from his stress in Vietnam. When he thinks about the war, it makes him feel sad and he feels that Vietnam was a complete waste.

Years later he had found a book called "Cover up" by Seymour Hersh. He found out that the battle he fought in was covered up because a General Koster didn't want to have any bad news about the division because of his ratings. Bruce feels it was a total betrayal of all the men that sacrificed their lives for their country. Bruce is glad that he survived and was able to tell his story.

This transcript contains an interview of Bruce Lee Mathieu. He was interviewed on March 18, 1998 by Vanz Steimle. Student oral history secretaries carried out the various processes: Nicole Sulunga did the transcribing, auditing, and editing. Candice Nozaki completed the final assembly. "[OH-321]" and other such notations tell the reader that an interview of that number has been completed with that individual and is on file in the Oral History collection at BYU-Hawaii.

William K. Wallace
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Laie, Hawaii
June 11, 1998

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SIDE A

INT Okay, just go ahead and then, first state your full name.

BM Yeah, Bruce Lee Mathieu.

INT Okay and your were born?

BM I was born February twenty-third, 1950.

INT Okay, and you fought in the Vietnam War is that correct?

BM Yeah, I spent two tours from March 1968 to August of sixty nine.

INT And the battle, what division were you in?

BM I was with the first battalion sixth infantry, one hundred ninety eighth infantry brigade and we were attached to the Americal division.

INT How, first off, how does the, how does Vietnam all together make you feel? Like how, when you report back on Vietnam, how does it make you feel inside?

BM Well, like you know I've had two heart attacks and the doctors at the hospital say it was specifically related from my stress in Vietnam. So yeah, I have to say it's makes me feel sad is an understatement, you know, I have, I had a whole bunch of flashbacks. When I returned back from Vietnam, I felt like I just didn't fit into this society, I didn't even want to live. Because of my memories and stuff. Yeah, I came a lot through some sad times, after the medications he gave me and, and the counseling I think I feel a whole lot better now, you know. But as far as Vietnam, I thought that, you know, it was a complete waste.

INT Have you ever felt, like the feelings that you have towards Vietnam, is it still a problem today, do you still feel, do you still reflect upon Vietnam or have you put it behind you?

BM Not so much as I used to. Before I'd think about Vietnam and I'd be obsessed by it. They invade your mind, you know and you couldn't get rid of it. Now it's just a completing thing. Maybe I'm older or I'm getting or else medication, it's a completing thing. You now, I think I'm glad.

INT You're glad?

BM Yeah, I'm putting it behind me, you know.

INT Okay, well, you were called in with your division to back up the Kham Duc originally, in essence, you know, I'd like to talk about the Battle of Que Son. And so, can you go ahead and tell me exactly what happened when you were sworn in and what took place from then, from that battle.

BM Okay, well, March tenth we were helicoptered into a, the surrounding hills around Kham Duc, which was a special forces camp, which the second NVA division over ran. So we've got sent in there to help the special forces evacuate, civilians and everything. A bunch of C-130's got blown up with civilians in it, a whole lot of guys got hurt and captured and became P.O.W.'s that are missing in action. (MIA)

INT So you got sent around May?

BM We got sent up into the surrounding hills around Kham Duc, in May of 1968, May 18. And also when we were setting up that night the defensive position up on the hill-top at dusk I heard an explosion go off. And all of the sudden I just kind of went out of it, I felt something hit my chest. And I felt my friend Robert Harris who is also from Barstow, California, he was a machine-gunner, he fell on top of me, and the next thing I knew I was on the med-a-vac chopper heading back to Chu-Lai. And I got up I was just unconscious when

I came to I was in the operating room, and they were operating on my chest and I wanted to know what happened. The doctor he wasn't sure what it was. If a shrapnel hit me or a bullet grazed me or whatever. I don't know what happened. See my chest here. He patched me up and stitched me up and I got back to the 198 infantry and was listening to the radio, and I got word over the radio that my friend Robert Harris, he only had two months left to go, he was a father he kept showing me a picture of his little daughter you know, and I got word over the radio that he died of a head-wound. And I just kind of, he was like my first friend that I knew who got killed you know, it just kind of put me in shock, you know. Then we also got word over the radio that um, Sergeant Ferguson got shot and about two days later they told me I had to get back on the field, they needed everybody they could get back on the field. So I went back out to the field and we went out to a Marine Fire Base and had a bunch of 105 howitzers artillery around the base. And I got there and this one Sergeant I can't remember his name and he said to me "See this surrounding hills around here were surrounded by the second NVA Division and this is a over-looking Queson Valley and he said see that hill across the valley he says uh that's where Bravo Company fell on Sergeant Ferguson and he was tied between stakes and burned to death. And in my mind I keep on thinking I wonder how that happened. I just wondered what that pilot felt like when he dropped the Napalm and saw the American soldier die. But anyways, the Bravo Company found it and said they found Sergeant Ferguson tied between the stakes. I heard that Sergeant Ferguson got shot, my squad leader Sergeant Perez kept on repeatedly try to go down this mountain to go get him and try and rescue him he made many attempts to rescue him but he couldn't do it, and totally freaked out they let him out for battle fatigue but he got a Bronze star for valor, for that.

Anyway, we were on the hilltop and they had a generator with like a hump, a camel's hill and I went down to the mess-camp where the generator was to get a little chocolate milk. And I was walking back up to my bunker and all of the sudden rockets hit the mess camp as I was walking up to the top. I just escaped from getting hit from a rocket. I got up to the top of the hill and that night we were on red

alert because we were expecting to get overran. So we stayed awake pretty much all night long manning our positions because we were expecting to get attacked that night. Nothing happened and then the next day our Company Commander told us to saddle up which means to put your gear on and we were gonna go up for a reconnaissance mission and I look back years later I realize they wanted us to be a decoy we go out there and bring the enemy out there in the open so they can bring in the artillery and cobras and the F-4 Phantoms. Anyways we'll get to this later. We walked down, and at that time I still had my stitches in me and as soon as I put on my rucksack and I heard POP! POP! POP! There goes all my stitches, and I thought great you know. So we got to the bottom and walked down this little trail to the bottom of this Fire Base. And our Accompanying Officer told us to look around the sides of the path of the base. And sure enough we found all this ammunition, helmets, stuff like that, you could tell definitely they were going to try to do some kind of over-run on this base. So the Captain called in and told them what we found. We continued to walk up the valley, it was a beautiful valley, it reminded me of Hanalei Valley, it was beautiful. It was hard to believe that a war was taking place in such a beautiful place, and we walking and I remember stopping by this one hamlet and I wanted to go check out this hamlet. I remember this little boy and little girl coming up to me begging for some food. I reached into my bag and got me some chocolate and gave it to them and half their bodies were burnt with Napalm. Half their skin was melted with Napalm. I just thought to myself now I can see why these people hate us. I gave my cerations to these little kids and we continued walking along and it was starting to get dark out so we set up across this little creek went on top this little knoll and we set up our defense positions and dug our fox-holes and everything like that. We took our three hour guard duty and then wake up the next guy, and we rotated ourselves with every three hours. By that time it would be morning again, and then over the night we got sniper fire, and everybody said don't shoot back because we didn't want to give our position away because of our muzzle flashes. So we didn't shoot back because we didn't want no rockets to land on top of us.

We got up early in the morning, it was a really hot day, like a hundred degrees out. I remember getting up watching the steam rising off the rice patties. I remember we were told to saddle up, and started walking along the creek, we started walking down this little pathway. There was a hill to our left and the creek to our right, there was rice paddies, it was like a jungle, and there was more hills to the right. As were walking along a few hours into the patrol all of the sudden all these rockets started coming down our path. We started getting automatic weapons from the front and rear we were what you call in the army X-d that's ambushed because it was coming from all different angles. All I could hear was "Medic, Medic!" We had guys crying out and I was towards the rear of my platoon at the time and I took over the machine gun who was the guy I told you that got shot in the head. And I had the machine gun and I remember spraying back there just in case something was back there. I remember looking at these bushes above me and I said I wonder what is behind these bushes. I took the pin out of my grenade and threw my grenade up into these bushes and I thought, "Oh man I hope, I counted to three." The grenade exploded up there. All of the sudden this Lieutenant came up to the guys who were in the rear and he says, "Where is Luiz Lavaqueze?" who was his ROT, which is the radio operator. We said we didn't know. He said he must be back there then, and he wanted to know if there was any volunteers who wanted to go back and get Luiz. And this Lieutenant who was from California he seemed like a pretty cool guy you know for a Lieutenant. Just because he had the idea of wanting to go back and get Luiz, who was only a radio operator and we would be kind of lost without the radio.

So I handed my M-16 machine gun over to a friend of mine named Henry Corbis, and Henry Corbis handed me his M-16 rifle and a bandoleer of ammunition. Me and the Lieutenant headed to the back and were calling, "Louie, Louie!" We started going back probably I say 50 to 75 yards back and we hear, "I'm in here." We look inside these bushes and there was this little tunnel, there was tunnels all over the place. We looked inside this tunnel and there was Luiz Lavaqueze and he had his M-16 jammed; his muzzle was jammed, the

butt of his rifle was jammed he couldn't get out. How he crawled into that little space, I don't know but when you're scared you crawl in anywhere, you know. So we un-jammed his rifle and we pulled Luiz out and his radio, and he was shot in the shoulder. Luiz is a real gregarious type of guy he kept on saying, you know he's kind of like a movie actor. He kept saying, "I'm a lover, not a fighter." But anyway we pulled him back and put him back behind our perimeter, the same time we were still being rocketed, and I set him into the shade. I looked at Luiz and I could just see the shock in his face. He was in shock he couldn't believe this was happening. At the moment we had orders to find where the rockets were coming from. My squad was chosen to go on this re-con mission to find out where these rockets were coming from, they were wiping out our company.

INT Right

BM So we crossed this river, crossed this rice patty, went through a little bit of jungle, crossed another rice patty, we got to the base of the mountain and there was this little hamlet there. A little village it wasn't even a village it was just a hamlet. And there was this big hill right there we climbed that hill. We started climbing up to the top of the hill and we got to the top and looked on the other side and said, "Oh my God and he says get me the hell out of here, there's a whole regiment of NVA on the other side of the hill. So we high-tailed it back down the hill and there was like a little bunker in this little hamlet and we got into this little earthen bunker and the air strikes were right on top of us artillery we called in the phantoms into the NVA. We thought the NVA saw us we called in cobra gun ship, plus the bombs and everything. The whole bunker was shaking we had the quick PRC 25-radio, we got word that we had to re-group with our company because it was getting hit really bad. We couldn't get separated from them.

On the way back we crossed this rice patty and all I remember was hearing this thud. And I looked back, and all of the sudden, I saw this red flash I didn't hear nothing, it felt like someone took this sledge hammer and was whacking me across the hip. I remember flying like in slow motion from one rice patty to another. All the sudden, I hit

the ground, the concussion just flew me from rice patty to the other. I hit the ground and thought "Wow! What happened?" I realized I was out in the open, and I just had to get out of there, because I was in the middle of this rice patty. I got up and I could feel this hot blood gushing down my leg and I could see on the other side of the dike the medic was starting to come up and get me. He met me half way and pulled me over to the other side of the dike where the rest of my any squad. The rest of my squad was looking at me, and I could just see the fear in their eyes. And then he took a scissors and ripped off my pants leg and put a bandage around my hip, and helped me to get across the rice patty again, and went through that jungle, this time when we got to the creek, the creek was pitch red with blood. It was as red as could be. You could see bodies smoking, you could see arms floating, you could see people with their intestines hanging out. You could hear medics working on guys, you could hear guys calling for medics constantly. And I said "Oh man, this is the worst battle I've been in." I remember I got behind this hill, away from the shrapnel that was flying around. I looked behind me and I saw Sergeant Martinez and he was a Korean Veteran. I could see the fear in his eyes. I thought man this guy is a Veteran of another war and I see the fear in his eyes so I know I'm in some pretty bad stuff. Then I looked ahead of me into the bloody creek and I saw these two soldiers bringing up this one soldier which I never forgot, and I remember looking down at his neck where his head used to be. His head was blown off except there was some kind of cord was still hanging around his head. Every time these two soldiers would pull him up his head would bounce around like a basketball. Sergeant Martinez told me to get up to the medivac to get medivaced out of here. I didn't know what to do, to stay or what. He told me to get medivaced because it wouldn't be good to be wounded and stay. So I got up there and medic was working on a whole bunch of guys, legs were blown off, arms were blown off, you name it . The dead were up there. I could hear the sound of the medivac choppers coming out from a distance.

Finally, the medivac chopper arrived and the most wounded guys were put on first. And all the sudden the chopper just took off, and a second chopper came and I was ready to board the chopper. The

chopper that just took off previous to us was blown right out of the sky. I was just praying to God, I just wanted to get out of here, you know. I just remember the medivac taking off and just hitting treetop so we could get out of there. Then we landed into M.A.S.H. unit which was in the middle of the jungle somewhere. I didn't even know they had it out there. They took the most wounded guys off, amputations and stuff like that happened right away. They tagged me and put me back on the chopper, and sent me out to, I think it was 95st evacuation hospital. I was laying from gurney and I remember laying from this gurney, and my captain he got shot also he was sitting next to me, and he got shot in the leg, and they brought him in. And I was laying there all by myself and I looked over to the right I saw 15 to 20 body bags. And they were still jerking, they were moving. These body bags were moving. Finally, I was wheeled into the operation table, and I told these doctors, they were pulling shrapnel out of my hips, and they said, "Oh, you're taking it like a good marine." I said to the doctor, yah I was out in the gurney, and I was really freaking out, there's guys still alive in the body bags out there. And he says no they are dead but their nerves are still winding down you know. So then they took all the shrapnel out of my hips. They sent me to the main ward, all you could hear was screaming and crying from all these men. They laid me next to this guy, they had a curtain around him. All I could hear was this moaning. I looked over to the left and I could see both of his legs were missing, his arm was missing. This guy couldn't even mourn his mother, he was in such bad shape. Then we started getting rocketed in the hospital. The rockets started hitting towards the airport, and the nurses came and tried to pull all of us who could get under the bed, to tell you the truth I just laid there in the bed, I didn't care if I got hit or not. I looked at the guy next to me and the shape he was in, so I just laid there. I didn't get under the bed or nothing. But I did remember I had to get up and go take a leak. So I got up and I carried this, what do you call it?

INT: I.V.

BM: Yah, I carried my I.V. With me and I remember I slipped on this blood, there was blood all over the place. They were bringing these

guys in and their guts were hanging out. This urinal was all full of blood. I came back to the bed and they were putting a cover over that guy, he died. The next day they told me I would be sent up to Kham Dun in Japan. They loaded us all into this C-141, the whole place was loaded with wounded soldiers heading up to Camp Zaka Japan. They carried me to the stretcher, and they tied us all to stretchers. We got up to Japan where they sent most of the army guys who were wounded and then I was laying there and a nurse came over to me and she said, "Bruce, the rest of your company is over in the next ward. I says, " Oh really?" So I went over there, and the first guy I saw was Henry Courbis, and he had both of his legs wrapped up. He told me they were going to try and save his legs. To this day I don't know what happened to him.

About a day later, I asked the nurse if I could just hobble over to the village outside of the hospital, I just wanted to pick up a guitar. So I went to pick up this guitar. I remember the guy at the music store, this Japanese guy, he told me thousands of yen I owed him. I knew he was wasn't lying, I couldn't calculate all this at that time. I just handed him all the yen that I had, and trusted him that he was giving me my change back. He gave me the guitar. I had this guy tune it for me because I realized I couldn't tune it no more my ears were ringing real bad. I was a little mad because I couldn't tune my guitar. So this other guy Angel who was also in my company he tuned my guitar. I bought a Beach Boy book and inside of the book there was this song called Sloop John B and so we decided to sit on Courbis's bed and we were all singing this Sloop John B. They said I was okay and they sent me to physical therapy. After the nurse took my stitches out they decided that I would go up to physical therapy. So they sent me up to another base up to another base, I can't remember the name of the base. I got up to the base and they put me into a room with three other guys. Across the hall there was Luiz Lavascus, and Louie was the guy you remember we went to rescue that was caught up in the tunnel. And he totally changed I could totally tell he had. Before he was really a gregarious type of guy, this time he was totally withdrawn. He ended up giving me the nickname 'Charlie Brown'. I guess because I would always ask him 'why' about everything. I would always question everything so he nick-

named me 'Charlie Brown'.

So we were going to physical therapy every single day. I felt like an idiot I should have profiled it more, every time the guy blew a whistle and we were supposed to run across the side of the gymnasium to the other side. And I was getting better and better at it and was running pretty fast. Pretty soon I was beating everybody else. I thought for sure I was gonna get sent back to the states. And all of the sudden my orders came in that I had to get sent back to Vietnam. And I thought, "I can't believe this man!" And I thought for sure this was a million dollar wound and I was gonna get sent back to the states. That's when I realized I should have profiled, when the guy blew the whistle I should have hobbled instead of ran. Anyway, I got back to the rest of my company and they were all new guys. I didn't see a single face that I knew before. I saw Kelly and , Cobbie they were the only two guys left. They said that the whole company either got killed or wounded. And I just wondered why that when I came back from Vietnam I heard the T.V. They always gave you the body count and told you about the whole hundred N.V.A. that got killed and the five Americans and I thought this doesn't sound right. I wonder if anybody knows about this battle I went through?

Years later I was searching through these books. I found this one book called Cover-Up by: Seymour Hersh, who was a investigator journalist. I'm sure a lot of people have heard about him. And wrote that they covered my battle up. And the reason why is because the General didn't really want to have any bad news about the division because of his ratings. There was this Lieutenant/Colonel, his name was Lieutenant/Colonel Parsons and he wasn't from West Point. He had to report all these reports to General Koster, he knew that one bad rating meant that you would not get promoted. He was a really ambitious Lieutenant/Colonel. I realized this is what happened that May 1968 the Special Forces Camp in the Americal Division was over-ran with heavy losses to one of the Americal Battalions that attempted to relieve the camp.

Koster ordered an investigation but his superiors never filed it to headquarters because it made the division look bad. I felt like this was a total betrayal of all these men who sacrificed their lives for their country. Their story was not even told, also I read that this Lieutenant Parson did the reports so it would never get to military systems command so people back in America would never hear about this story. And I am here with you know Vanz telling you this story. I'm just lucky I survived and I'm really sad that those guys who sacrificed their lives that their story could not be told and I hope that people will know about this and I pray that it will never happen again. I just really appreciate your interest in this.

END OF INTERVIEW