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Kenneth Quinlan Oral History Interview

Joel Barker, Interviewer

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Joel Barker (JB): So we can start by asking your name.

Kenneth Quinlan (KQ): Kenneth Quinlan

JB: Where are you from?

KQ: Lake City, Iowa

JB: How long did you live there?

KQ: Oh, twenty years

JB: When I say the term "Cold War," what comes to mind, what do you remember?

KQ: Atomic bomb drills in school.

JB: Perhaps go into detail on that.

KQ: Well because the Russia had gotten the atomic weapons, and we were always against each other, there was always the possibility we could come become under an atomic bomb attack and, so they thought that they wanted to protect us and have us hide under deep desks. Now I didn't ever understand how that would protect me from an atomic bomb, because the blast would disintegrate everything.

JB: So, you mentioned how the Soviet Union had kind of a lingering thought in the lives of everyday people. How did the thoughts of the Soviet Union affect you while you were growing up?

KQ: Well you always had kind of a small part of you with a little fear wondering if some day all of a sudden there would be explosions, and we'd be under attack from Russia, and then the United States in turn would react and attack them, and if we'd destroy the Earth. But it was only.... that was just a small part of it, but you thought about it from time to time. I think most of us did.

JB: So what, did you have any, would you can say would be trustable knowledge on the Soviets or how they lived compared to us?

KQ: Well only what we learned in school or read in the newspapers, what we were being told by the government, but I had no direct knowledge myself.

JB: So skipping forward a little bit to say senior year of high school, what uh important events were going on around that time?

KQ: Well that was the year after JFK was assassinated and Vietnam was actually building up at that time. We hadn't really got to the peak until '65 or '66, in the late 60s anyway. And then the draft was still going on, so all the kids that were graduating, all the men or all the boys, that were graduating was wondering if you were going to wind up going to Vietnam. Because we didn't have, it wasn't a volunteer type thing, we were all could be conscripted by our government to go to Vietnam.

JB: What were your thoughts on that conscription?

KQ: Well I never even thought about it. Later on, I heard people that didn't want to go to war were against it, that they uh opted out by running off to Canada or escaping or hiding because they didn't want to go into war. And that never dawned on me even when I got into the service, because if the government told us to do something, we were red white and blue, and from where I grew up, if the government told you you had to go to war to defend our country or to defend something, you didn't ask questions, you just did it, because you were, what do you call that, that you're compatriot, your allegiance to the United States. You answered without any question. And we just thought that that was the way it was.

JB: So tell us more about, say, you drafted?

KQ: No, but my draft number was pushed up to like, in the top 5, and I knew I was going to be drafted in my county within a few weeks or maybe a month. And during the draft they could, mainly they put you in the army, but we went through a period there where they needed more marines. So, at that time I would guess that it was 7 out of 10 guys that were drafted they put 'em in the marines. And I didn't want anything to do with that, because I thought the marines went over to Vietnam and either came back dead or heroes. And I didn't want to do that, so I joined the Air Force before I was drafted to try to escape being a marine.

JB: So, were there any kinds of special requirements or things that you needed for the Air Force?

KQ: Well you just had to have a high school degree, and you had to, they would do a background check on you to make sure you were not a criminal or did anything bad, and then if you passed that background check you would be accepted.

JB: A big part of, you could say motivating one to go fight, involves their training. So what was it like to train with the Air Force?

KQ: Well actually the training basically was to take everybody and knock everybody's personality down rather than an individual, like they'd cut off all your hair, they'd take your clothes away from you, and give you the same clothes. They were trying to form everybody into a team and a unit that thought as a unit rather than an individual, and then they, the whole idea was to get you physically fit and prepared in weaponry and things like that. We had to run obstacle courses while machine guns are going and rifles and maybe a mortar attack, or something like that and go under barbed wire and do things like that to prepare you for, a simulation, it was a simulation of what it would be like if you actually got into battle in war.

JB: Was there any point during your training where you felt like you were being, you knew that the enemy was communist, and did you ever feel especially motivated towards fighting this enemy because of that?

KQ: I bought into the argument, I think it was put out mainly by the government that if we allowed the communists to win in Vietnam, then there'd be a domino effect where then they would move on to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, countries like that. In other words, a lot of other countries would become communist if we failed there, and I bought into that. Later on after I got out I realized I thought that it was just an excuse for us to go to war with Vietnam, which was basically, I thought afterwards was a revolution where we had, the north fighting the south, and Vietnam was doing it for unity, and we made it out like we were trying to prevent communists from taking over the country. So then I disagreed with why we ever went over there, and didn't think that it was just or fair war.

JB: So what was your time over there like?

KQ: Well first of all the reason, one of other reasons why I joined the Air Force was, of course recruiters back then would tell you just about anything to get you into the service, into their branch of the service, and one of the reasons I joined the Air Force was they said, there probably wasn't a very big chance that I would go to Vietnam because I would be basically combat support, where we would send supplies or do things and support the people that were fighting in Vietnam, the military. Well that wasn't the truth, I no more got out of basic training, and shortly thereafter got orders to go to Vietnam, and then you asked me, what about going to Vietnam?

JB: What was it like there?

KQ: Oh, what was it like. Well so when we got over there, we were basically, I was in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, which is a large, we had Navy, Marines, Koreans, Korean army, and army and Air Force and navy personnel at that base because it was right on the coast of Vietnam. And we basically were supplying and helping the guys that were in battle. We were supporting them

with material, moving 'em in and out on airplanes, going in and getting them if they were in trouble, but we didn't see direct combat. We would become attack by mortar rounds, which weren't too bad but the worst of it was rockets, because they were big and sounded like A bombs coming in. And there wasn't anything we could do to fight back, because we were ground support or combat support, and the troops around our perimeters and stuff were the ones that would try to prevent 'em from overrunning our base. And so we kind of felt like we were in this little spot, that we really couldn't do much about it but just hope that we didn't get killed.

JB: Definitely a scary situation to be in, but putting those things aside, after the war what did you do?

KQ: Uh well when I came home there was certain things, how you were affected, although I wasn't in direct combat but came under attack and things, one of the first things you thought of, and I kinda goes back to what it was like when I was in Vietnam was, it dawned on you that you were just doing your job to support the troops and somebody out there, the enemy, was trying to kill you, and you really weren't doing anything except doing your job, and it dawned on you. It'd be like living in Bethalto, and outside the city of Bethalto the enemy wanted to kill everybody in Bethalto. So you walked around wondering if snipers would get you or if, at your job, or they would throw rockets or mortar rounds to attack you and want to kill you, and you didn't understand why because you were doing your job. So anyway, you came back then, and you had to adjust to that. And the main thing you would have to adjust to was sounds, and sometimes smells and things like that, but. A lot of guys came back, and it took them years to get used to car doors slamming, cars backfiring, because immediately you thought you were being under attack from a mortar round or rocket coming in. Guys would fall on the floor quickly because we were taught the quicker you got to the ground, the more chances you had of surviving an attack. And so a lot of guys adjusted to that over a few years, but a lot of guys never did. It always affect their persona wherever they were. When I came back and went to work, I worked for JCPenny while I went to college, and it was hard to stay in the lunchroom or interior room in the building because you heard noises like the air conditioning or heat kicking in and on and sometimes it'd go boom, and it really messed you up. Got you anxious, so there were several other guys that had gotten out of Vietnam about the same time I did, and they were a navy guy and an army guy and me. And the army guy was really shook up about it, so all three of us for lunch would always go outside on the curb and eat a lot of times so we didn't hear those sounds so much, and especially this guy. He jumped out of, he jumped out of a car, his wife was taking him to work, and a car backfired. He was on a city street, and he jumped out of the car thinking it was an attack or something. They weren't going very fast, so it didn't hurt him that bad. But that was the whole thing. You had to get over, just the time you spent there, you had to get over all the sights, sounds, smells, and the idea that somebody had been trying to kill you, and you had to adjust to that. Most guys did, some guys didn't, because there wasn't ever really any debriefings. They didn't tell you how you, psychologically, how you could deal with that. You just went over there, it was the middle of a war, people were getting killed. You came back, okay now you're a

civilian, go to work. And you're going, "Wow I got all things inside my mind," but the military or government didn't do anything to help us get through that emotionally or debrief us, I guess I don't know what word to use, that would get you adjusted to being back in the United States, being back in our home.

JB: Did your experiences of Vietnam change you opinions on communists?

KQ: No not really, what it got me to change my mind on was not always accepting what I would read or what people would tell me about other governments or war and things like that. It made me open up more to whether or not we should really get involved in wars, whether we shouldn't, and not necessarily just believe exactly what the government told us, but to use our common sense and to think about it and try to understand different points of view and see which, you know, maybe you're more open to, not just standing and saluting when the government told you to do something, but really ask questions about it. Question it, so it did change a lot of us that way. Course that created problems for some guys, because then they'd be, they got so they thought the government maybe lied to us so they believed everybody did, like your job or your school or whatever.

JB: So, moving forward a little more, did you watch the fall of communism on the television like the Berlin Wall when it went down?

KQ: Oh I read a lot about it watched it, seeing pictures, watched it on TV, and thought that it was probably a good thing. And then right after that, then the breakup, shortly thereafter, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and I thought that that was good for the world as well.

JB: Definitely a whole new world for everybody.

KQ: Well basically it felt like the risk of the Cold War, the world being destroyed by atomic attacks from somebody had lessened quite a bit. And that possibility wasn't so much anymore, and of course that's, and then we started the denuclearization. I can't remember if that started right after Reagan, I think and Clinton got involved in that and we started to denuclearize and have treaties with Russia to downsize, and then as Russia started coming back and becoming more powerful, although not so much communistic, but more a dictatorship, now a lot of that fear is coming back because it seems as if Russia wants to be a domineering country and influence everybody else, other countries, and part of the way to do that is with a strong military and nuclear capability.

JB: So, to kind of end things all off, how did you get to be living here in Bethalto?

KQ: I came back, and I was living in Iowa, actually Omaha, Nebraska going to college there, and then after a couple of years I moved back into Iowa, and after a number of years, oh 25, no it's been about 27 years ago, I went through a divorce, and I was working for a company down

here in Troy, Illinois, and they had wanted me to come down and become a partner with them, so then I wound up moving down here after my divorce. So that would have been 28 years ago, yeah, 27 years ago.1991.

JB: Well Mr. Quinlan I thank you for your time today, and all the information that you have provided. Is there anything else you would like to say?

KQ: No I think that's pretty much it, and you're welcome.