



1968: Ed Wood

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This story is based on one of a series of interviews conducted by South Kingstown (RI) High School students in the Spring of 1998. All of the interviews were focused on recollections of the year 1968. In addition to the student's edited story below, you can find on this site the electronic transcript of the interview and a quicktime recording of the encounter , as well as a table of cues and contents .

Title: A Former Marine Turned Reporter in 1968

Ed Wood grew up in a suburb of Detroit. He became a Marine through the ROTC program at the University of Michigan. Vietnam would forever change Ed's outlook on life, people, and the world .

I grew up in a suburb of Detroit named Garden City. It was an all white suburb, no black people lived there. My brother and I were both very active in school activities. I worked at a nearby farm picking tomatoes and cucumbers all summer. I grew up in what we called the 'Sputnik Era,' when the Russians put [a satellite] in space before the U.S. So, like a lot of people at the time, I thought I wanted to be an engineer. But since I wasn't very well suited to be an engineer, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer.

Tell me about your experience at the University of Michigan.

I was in the class of '62 and a political science major. The famous Tom Hayden was also in the class of '62. He was a political science major, and I was in several classes with him. He was the first person I ever saw, as an undergraduate, openly challenge professors and get into very passionate arguments with them. In those days, undergraduates just didn't do that. I remember staying up until one or two o'clock in the morning when Kennedy was going to come to campus to give a speech. We stayed up until he came and heard his speech. It actually became very famous in which he announced his plans to create the Peace Corps.

What made you join the R.O.T.C.?

I really made the decision when I was a senior in high school in 1958. It was a time when there was a draft so most everybody thought they were going into the military for at least two years. It wasn't that I gave it a whole lot of thought. I never thought of being a career military person. You figured that you would get drafted anyway, and so you planned as to how you would serve, not whether you would serve. I planned to go to college, and it seemed to make sense to go into the military for at least two years and be an officer and have a much better life and more money rather than be an enlisted man.

I was in the Marine Corps for three years before I went to Vietnam. I had served in Virginia and Texas for one year. Then, I got married and went to Hawaii, so I had been in in Hawaii two years. In the spring of 1966 [1965], we began to plan for a mock invasion of California, a training exercise. Then, very suddenly without any warning, they said that instead of going to California, we'd be going to Okinawa. It was a very scary time. It was just after several things had happened in Vietnam. We had just started bombing. So we had only overnight notice as to leaving. So you went home to have a last evening with your wife. I remember she drove me down to the ship. It was a very emotional scene, and nobody knew when we would be home, or if we would be home, and we took off on the ships.

We went into the north part of Vietnam, Da Nang, in April of 1965. We didn't know what to expect. There hadn't been large groups of American soldiers in Vietnam before we arrived. We lived in very primitive conditions for a long time. When we got there, we landed on a beach with what we brought with us and set up tents. We ate for several weeks what is called sea rations, just little boxes of food they gave us that was cold. Then, we started eating K rations in which they had Coke for us but still not very good food. So, the whole time we were there, the food wasn't very good, and we lived in tents on this big sandy area. So it was very rugged living conditions.

I think all of us had come into the military in the early sixties at a time when the Korean war had been over for a while and the focus was on geo-political type things: ICBMs, nuclear war. Everybody thought that there was not much place anymore for ground combat. So while we trained, I think no one felt that they'd actually use ground combat in a war. You felt either there would be an exchange of nuclear warheads, and we'd destroy half the world, or there wouldn't be anymore war. Then suddenly, here we were going to Vietnam fighting very much a ground war as was fought in the second World War. We weren't prepared for that, and we certainly weren't looking forward to it. We didn't feel we had any choice; we just went. I bought into the domino type theory, that is, if we allowed South Vietnam to fall to the communists, they could sweep through the peninsula of Southeastern Asia and go into Japan. You could tell that it was much more of a civil war type of situation than we thought of it as being before we arrived. When you got over there, you realized the North Vietnamese had a very ideological commitment to what they were doing. They were very good guerrilla warfare people, and it was hard to find them and fight them and so it kept escalating. I think we were just fighting an enemy who was willing to fight for fifty-one hundred years if they wanted. It was a way of life to them because they had been doing it for so long. It was pretty clear that the South Vietnamese had less of a cause, and it made it more difficult to be there. We didn't have the patience to stay there for however long it would have taken.

I was in the artillery, so I wasn't on the front line. Our units would go out and look for the Viet Cong. Every once in a while, we'd find them and there would be a battle. There were very few attacks from the Viet Cong. It was us just trying to find people to fight. We would find them, and there would be some fighting.

I remember going on the ship to Vietnam. You were more afraid of being afraid that anything else. I mean you wondered how you would react if someone shot at you. It is a real eye opener to think that somebody you didn't even know was trying to kill you. So at first it is wonderment and then you get angry at it. It was more a feeling of anger than of fear.

Among the officers there was a real break between people who were career marines and those who were going to be in three, four, or five years and then get out. The non-career marines had a real camaraderie built up among them. I made the closest friendships I've ever had in my life, and we are still good friends.

While I was in Vietnam, I filled out applications to lots of law schools. That's what I thought I was going to do. I'll never forget just flying home on the plane from Japan to Hawaii where my wife was. I sat up all night, and it somehow came to me that I did not want that kind of structure in my life. I got off the plane and decided that I wasn't going to do that without knowing what I was going to do. Homecoming in my own mind was kind of strange because for the first time in my life since about junior high school, I didn't have any sort of plan. When I was in high school, I knew I was going to college. When I was in college, I knew I was going to go into the military. The whole time I was in the military, I knew I was going to law school. Suddenly, when I got out I had spent thirteen months in Vietnam, landed, and had no idea what I was going to do or how I was going to do it. The adjustment to living in Vietnam was much easier than the adjustment to leaving Vietnam. I do not quite know why, but I felt estranged from people. You lost all these close relationships. I think we didn't feel like we had anything in common with anybody who hadn't been there. So we felt very isolated and it took me many months (to adjust).

I picked up a book called The U.S. and Japan by Reischauer who was a professor at Harvard, read it, and decided I wanted to study Japanese. About two weeks earlier, I decided I didn't want to be a lawyer after thinking for ten years that I did. Then instantly, I decided I would study Japanese because I felt Asia was a very interesting place the whole time I was over there, and I wanted to know more about it. I went back to Hawaii and enrolled in a summer school to study Japanese. We decided to spend that summer in Hawaii. Finally, we decided we were just too far from family.

I applied to the University of Michigan, and I studied Japanese there again with out having much of an idea why. That whole summer I can remember being very isolated from people. I had this course with all these younger people. Studying with them and working hard, you think I would have made some friends, but I just didn't want anything to do with anybody else. It wasn't that I held anything against them, I just felt that I had nothing in common with them. People would want to talk about Vietnam, but I had no desire to talk about Vietnam. It was many years before I wanted to talk about it at all. It was a strange period in my life. When I went to the University of Michigan, I thought I might become a student and get my PH.D in Japanese politics or history. I applied for a lot of scholarships. They were called National Defense Language Scholarships, or something, that were very good, but I didn't get any of them. I remember going to the two professors in charge of awarding them and asking why I didn't get anything. It seemed like I was doing as well as other people. They mentioned that a big part of their reasoning was whether a person needed it or not, and I was getting what they called the G.I. Bill at the time. I was getting some support from that and so they felt that I didn't need it as much as other people who had gotten it. It seemed very ironic to me that this was called the National Defense Scholarship, and the only person that had been in the military couldn't get one. The professors that I had, were great people, but they had all been to the Second World War. They had come back and gone to graduate school under the G.I. Bill. At that time, it paid for everything, and they assumed that I was getting paid enough. It really wasn't enough money. They had the idea that it was as good as when they got it, and it just really wasn't. So, I sort of got mad at the whole academic type of thing and decided I wouldn't get a PH.D which was a good decision. I decided I would become a newspaper reporter instead, so that's what I went on and did.

I went to Indianapolis to work for the Associated Press and arrived there in the middle of the primary election RFK entered in which he was running against Eugene McCarthy. It was very exciting to be a brand new reporter covering a number of things. I saw Robert Kennedy many times. I actually covered speeches that he made. That was a very exciting time, 1968-69, to be a journalist in Indianapolis. I got to go see George Wallace campaign and Hubert Humphrey and Nixon. All of them came through Indianapolis and I would go as a reporter. Then when the Chicago Convention came along later in the year, I remember our photographer coming back. He had been involved in several situations where he was teargassed by the police and pushed around just trying to do his job, so my reaction was very anti-police and anti-Daley, I was very angry at them and the types of things they did. Also, I was feeling that the things that were happening were going to insure the election of Nixon, which I felt would not be good for the country. I also felt a lot of anger not only at the police, but also anger at the demonstrators. It seemed to me what they were doing, I'm sure they felt it was important trying to slow down the war, but they were insuring that the Republicans would be elected who were less likely to end the war, I always thought.

I became the Civil Rights writer for one summer, it was the summer of '69. There were a series of race riots across large towns in Indiana. It seemed every weekend there was another one. They would blow up one after another. Then in the fall, I tried to make sense of it all by finding some people who worked with inner city kids. They introduced me to young black men who had started one of the riots, and I would go and meet with them. I wrote this big article about their story and the Associated Press wouldn't run it. They didn't think it was their business to report on the black person's point of view. The fact that they wouldn't run it caused a lot of bad feelings. This was probably one of the reasons I left and came to Rhode Island.

1968 was a real change in my life. I had been in the military, I had been to Vietnam, so generally had an blind support for the government. I had grown up thinking that you supported your country whatever they did. I didn't think much about it in the military, whether it was right to be in Vietnam or not. It was just something we had to do. During that period, I could feel my mind changing and realizing that there were so many more important things that America should be spending its time trying to work out such as racism, poverty, and these kind of things. Also, that all this effort we were spending in Southeast Asia was a huge waste of time and life and money. Just seemed ridiculous over that period in 1968, I changed my whole attitude.