

LOU DAVIS -- NBC VIETNAM CORRESPONDENT

Lou: Lou Davis.

Speaker 1: Can you spell it?

Lou: L-O-U D-A-V-I-S.

Speaker 1: Where are you from?

Lou: Right now from Baltimore, former NBC correspondent in '70 and '71 and '72. Actually I was working for WNEW in New York in '70, and I got fired. They had a layoff ... they laid three reporters off. Folks at NBC were down the street, of course, when heard about it.

And the next day I got a call from one of the producers of NBC, and they asked me if I might be interested in job with them. Of course, so I went it, talked to one of the executives who asked me if I was interested in a correspondent's job, which I immediately accepted, and then he gave me the bad news. He told me I was going to Vietnam. So I bought myself a trench coat, and with absolutely no training at all, after a week working for NBC, they put me on a plane and sent me to Saigon. That's how I got there.

Speaker 1: How did you prepare for a trip like that? Did you get an encyclopedia [inaudible 00:01:32] where the hell is this place, and what it's all about or?

Lou: You can't prepare for it. I was working as a reporter, I have reporting, I have television reporting skills, but I was going to war, and it was a scary situation. It was frightening, but it was a tremendous opportunity, here was a chance to go to work for the big network, NBC. They told me basically they would give me a one-year contract, but there were no guarantees. When I came back they would reevaluate, but I say okay. Then the hard part is going home and telling my mother that I'm going to Vietnam. She wasn't very happy about it, but again it was a tremendous opportunity.

It turns out that I went to work the next day, and got through all the paperwork, and at the end of the day, they said you are going to Chicago. The guy that's covering the Chicago Seven Conspiracy Trial was taken ill, so instead of going to Vietnam, I went to Chicago for a week in 30° weather. It was snowing, it was raining, it was miserable, it was a great story but I was cold. Cold, cold, cold.

I was there for a week and finished that up, came back the next day, and they put me on a plane to Vietnam. So one day I'm in 30° miserably cold weather, they fly me to Saigon, and it's 100° and the 100% humidity, and I had no idea where I was or what I was doing. I was met at the airport by one of the producers who paid my way through immigration there, he got me through quickly, put me in a cab, rush me through Saigon because there was some fighting and some difficulty there. Rush me through Saigon and got me to the office, and then they started my orientation.

Speaker 1: What year was this?

Lou: That was '70. It was January of '70. They wanted to get me to Saigon in time for [TAT 00:03:55] of '70 because they had heard that there was going to be a major offensive again, as there was in '68. There was an offense, it didn't, it wasn't their major offensive, that didn't happen, but there was fighting and there was tear gas in Saigon, and it was a dangerous situation, especially for a young guy who just gotten there with no experience at all. I didn't even have fatigues. I had to go to the black market and buy fatigues.

The first thing they said is to get a gas mask, buy a gas mask, which I found. The only thing that they didn't tell me was that gas mask had filters. I had this gas mask without a filter, and of course the first-time I went out on a story, and somebody threw a gas mask, a teargas grenade, put the thing on, it didn't work at all. Very quickly I learned ...

Speaker 1: What was your first impressions when that plane landed [inaudible 00:05:07] or wherever and?

Lou: [inaudible 00:05:08].

Speaker 1: How old were you by the way?

Lou: I was 30, 32.

Speaker 1: What was your first impressions those first few hours, as you were driving through Saigon, just had to be ...

Lou: What am I doing here? I wasn't sure that I did the right thing. I was scared, and as I say they picked me up at the airport, put me in a cab, and I'm driving through Saigon, through [Trosan 00:05:38] and all the, we went all through from

one end of Saigon to the other to get to the office. You could hear gunfire, and you could off in the distance see the smoke from the teargas. The only person with me was basically a cabdriver, who came to pick me up, take me to the office. I wasn't sure I'd done the right thing at all. Once I got to the office it was fine, because the other guys were there and got a quick orientation and had a liquid, and everything got better.

When I got there, the first week was basically an orientation week, and they introduced me to the MACV people, the military advisers, the public information people. They took me on a tour of the entire country, so I had we going from through all the zones and learning basically what was going on there, not reporting, but getting orientated up in the highlands, the central highlands down to the Mekong Delta, all in supply helicopters, we'd go for a day, spend a day there. That gave me an orientation and an idea of what was going on.

My first story, I got back to Saigon, and it turns out that it was a thing called a commando, a Roman plow. It was a new device, it was a gigantic plow with armored. The military was having trouble at that time with bombs, with, what do you call it?

Speaker 1: Mines.

Lou: Mines. They take these plows and plow out field and just blow them up. They just started doing that, that was the first story that I sent back, how it happened. Interesting part of that, and just to show you how dumb and how stupid and how inexperienced I was, we are working with this guy on the Roman Plow, and he is doing the field and there are bombs going off, and it's lunchtime, so he stops, and I stopped, and our crew. I walked over to a tree and sat down and leaned against a tree and ate my lunch, finished that, came back, and then the plow come after I'm finished, the plow comes and knocks the tree down, so bomb on the other side of it, and it actually went off, scared the, out of me.

It taught me a lesson right away at the beginning that you really don't know how dangerous things are there until after it's over. You could be shot at, you could be missed, narrowly missed, and you don't know until it's finished, which I guess is a good thing. I was based in Saigon but spent very little time in Saigon. Saigon was just the place to come back to file. Down south in the Delta, it was hot and it was humid, we are talking 110, 100% humidity. You got to keep covered up because of the bugs and the insects and everything. It's not very comfortable. Once you got up to the highlands, it's a little better, but it's warm.

Speaker 1: Did you have to do anything special for your camera?

Lou: I don't think so. The cameras were very, very different then. They were big and they were bulky but they were sturdy. We really had very, very little problems with our equipment. We had basically two cameras, the sound camera, the big sound camera that required a couple of people to operate, and then we had the little handheld, Bell & Howell, that they say, you could use as hammer because it was so good.

Speaker 1: You were shooting films out.

Lou: We were shooting film, 16mm film, and we never really see the process because it wasn't processed in Vietnam. They said it was because the water wasn't pure enough, then they couldn't run a processor, but the real reason was NBC wanted to get the film out of Vietnam before the censors could get to it. They send it out unprocessed, so nobody saw. We didn't see it either. We had to write our scripts from memory. Here is what I think my cameraman shot. Here is what I'll write to, and then in LA when it got back to the States, they put it together. We never really saw our finished packages until we got home a year later. The film was kept, the actual film.

Speaker 1: They had married the audio, your audio recording, your narration to ...?

Lou: Yes. It was certainly nothing like '68, but there was an attack at the beginning of TET in '70, and they took over several sections of Saigon, but they were beaten back fairly easily. It was my first experience, that was my first experience with the actual combat. Basically what I did then was linked up with an American unit, an infantry unit, stayed with them and did the story on how they captured several block, recaptured several blocks of the city real estate after it was all over. But there was nowhere near what '68 was like. The night before TET, I linked up with the unit at their headquarters, met some of the guys, hung out with them. The next day we actually went out and fought.

Speaker 1: Did you rather have a close call?

Lou: As I said, yes, a couple of times you could hear the bullets whizzing by. There was one time, again it was at the very beginning and I was very inexperienced. There was a battle going on in the Central Highlands, one of the rice paddies. The rice paddies are, they had these ridges that are both along the outside and the

paddies are built in the middle and the ridges are where you walk around. There is a battle going on for this real estate.

They flew us in in a Huey, in a chopper, and we hovered over the brim. The troops are jumping out and doing their positions. I jumped out, I missed the brim, landed in the paddy and ended up with mud up to my waist. I could not move, I was basically paralyzed, and there is fighting going on all around me. I couldn't bend down, I couldn't ... A couple of guys came and actually had to pull me out. I think that was probably the closest call I ever had. But it was [inaudible 00:13:59] and scary.

Speaker 1: Did you write your mother a letter about that?

Lou: No, I never told her about that. Never told her about that. That was a fairly big battle, it went out for most of the day, and the American troops were successful and recaptured that piece of property.

Speaker 1: Do you happen to remember the village name or what, [inaudible 00:14:23] it was down in the Mekong Delta?

Lou: No, it was in the Central Highlands.

Speaker 1: Central.

Lou: It was in the Central Highlands.

Speaker 1: Do you think that [inaudible 00:14:30]?

Lou: No.

Speaker 1: Why?

Lou: Because we didn't think the armored troops were ready. Basically the same situation that you had, you have now. The Americans were doing all of the major fighting, all of the major work. The idea, of course, since the 60s was to train the Vietnamese to get them to take over, but it wasn't working. Of course, we saw that as soon as the Vietnamization began. Once the American troops left, or even started to leave. The Vietnamese just couldn't handle it, couldn't handle it.

Speaker 1: The other troops [inaudible 00:15:23] right, you communicate [inaudible 00:15:25] educational phone calls that ...

Lou: Right. There were phone calls but we really couldn't.

Speaker 1: Did she say that she had been watching your progress on the NBC night news?

Lou: Oh yeah, she watched it, the whole family, the whole family watched every night, and I get letters from them, comb your hair, shave, fix your tie.

Speaker 1: Was there a camaraderie, if you will, with the other TV network correspondents?

Lou: Absolutely. We were on the same situation, and a lot of us, there were some veterans there, they were the Peter Arnett's and the [inaudible 00:16:15] but most of the TV correspondents were young guys like me who are over there for, maybe just the first or the second time. We all had offices in Saigon pretty close to each other. Our office, for example, was right next to her, right next door to the Associated Press. We'd lunch together and we hang out together, and we go out on stories together.

There was safety in numbers, and we watched each other's back because there were some things that were more important in getting a story in, and that was surviving. I had been there for four months, and I got a call to go to Cambodia because Welles Hangen had disappeared. Welles was an NBC correspondent in the Cambodian Bureau. He and his crew went out one day to do a story, and never came back.

It was years before they found their bodies, but they sent me to Phnom Penh, to Cambodia to basically run that bureau and to help in trying to find him for several weeks together with some American advisers. We were going out looking for Welles and for his crew and for, he went out in a white Mercedes that morning looking for a story, which is, we did that a lot, we'd go out in the morning and drive around or fly around until we'd find something to shoot, find a story. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, Welles got caught in an ambush and was killed, his whole crew was killed, and they didn't find the body until three or four years afterwards.

Speaker 1: Did NBC buy any special life insurance for Lou Davis when he is over there?

Lou: I never asked. Not that I know of. I don't think so. They took care of it. In NBC that was very good. The networks were very good, they took care of you. They made sure that you receive and they helped you. Of course, once I got back, I was on, as I said, I had a one-year contract, I was on my own, I had to renegotiate the whole thing, but I knew that, I knew that going in. I knew that going in.

Speaker 1: So that 12 months you were there, how did that happen?

Lou: The way it worked was, we were based in Saigon, all right. I actually lived in a hotel in Saigon, in the Continental Hotel for a year. Every evening the military would have briefings on what was going on all over the country. We'd go to these briefings together with my Bureau Chief and the other guys, say this might be the place to go today, may be we'll get a story there. Then we'd link up the next morning, the supply helicopter that was going to [inaudible 00:19:34] or some place like that. Fly out with them, stay there until we got a story, and then fly back. We'll be back in Saigon again, have a couple days off to relax to unwind, and then do the same thing again. I don't remember what the question was.

Speaker 1: I was just trying to get a sense of the operation of a day-to-day logistics anyway.

Lou: But I was living in the Continental Hotel, which was pretty plush. Two or three nights a week I'd be there, the rest of the time we'd out in the bush, we'd out in the field with the troops. Now they call it embedded, that term didn't exist then. There is also big difference between then and now in the embedding. We were completely free to do our reporting. There was, we didn't have to sign any papers, we didn't have to ... there was no censorship, we'd do our story, get it done and get it out, which was very different from the troops that are, the reporters that are embedded with troops now. They're very restricted in what they can shoot, and their scripts are checked before they do. We had a lot more freedom.

The only way that the military controlled us, the only way that the military controlled us was with transportation. If they didn't want us to do a story, all of a sudden there were no helicopters going there, but the helicopters were full. But that was very, very rare. We were pretty free to move around, and get our stories and get them filed. There was one time I was actually in Cambodia, it was during the incursion, talk a little bit about the incursion if you like, but it was during the incursion I got a terrific story about a young guy who did a very, very, I'm sorry.

I got a terrific story about a young guy who did a very courageous thing, and wanted to rush the story back. I got into a helicopter, supply helicopter going back. It got diverted, instead of going to Saigon I ended up down in the Mekong Delta, in the middle of nowhere, all by myself, with just my Vietnamese cameraman. We rented a school bus and drove from the Delta to Saigon, got there in time to get the film on the plane, and back to Los Angeles, all kinds of things like that going on, all year long. It was just a matter of improvising, because basically we were on our own.

Speaker 1: [inaudible 00:22:47] by your wits.

Lou: I have no doubt that it did, absolutely. We knew it too because if we did a story that was even a little credible, or something that they didn't want us to get on the air, we'd hear about it the next day from the military advisors. But we were free to do it. There was one time that they threatened to take my credentials away. I don't remember what the story was, it was a story about the number of people that were killed. It was a tremendous controversy over the numbers.

Speaker 1: The body count.

Lou: The body count, exactly. The way the military was doing the body count. Basically was with helicopters, it fly over 40 people down there, there were 40 people dead, that kind of thing. It was completely bogus, completely bogus. I did a story on it. They got very upset. They yelled a little bit, but threatened to take my credentials away, but it never happened because NBC backed me up. I think most of the reporters down there in Vietnam, especially the young kids were trying to be completely neutral.

I certainly did and that was our marching orders. You are reporting, you are not a commentator, you are a reporter, just tell what happens. I think that's what most of us try to do. The Cronkite's and the Brinkley's and the [inaudible 00:24:53], that's different, they were anchors, they were commentators, it's a different job, it's a different job. But we bent over backwards as ... I still do reporting, to be completely neutral.

Larry Hogan may not believe that, but we certainly try, and it was, I felt it was very, very important while I was there to be as completely neutral and to tell the story as it was happening, and let other people decide whether it's good or whether it's bad. We had to go out, we actually had to go out and get the pictures, and they could do it by phone. They could do it by conversation, but we

actually had to be there. That's not saying that they didn't also go out and cover because they were out there a lot too, especially the AP, the wire reporters. But we actually had to be there, we had to be at the spot because we had to get the picture. It's a different job, it's a different kind of job, and it's still the case today.

Speaker 1: They were condescending those print guys from the [inaudible 00:26:20] etc., like that towards the TV people.

Lou: We didn't get around together that much. There was some condensation, some. There was a little bit of that, but we were all in a delicate situation, we were all in a difficult situation, we were all in a dangerous situation. We helped each other out, not to give our stories away, but we watched each, as I say, we watched each other's backs.

Speaker 1: Your favorite story from that year over there.

Lou: The favorite story, probably the most significant story that I did was the Cambodian incursion. I had been there couple of months, and suddenly I found out, actually the night before it happened that the ... Let me go back and set it up. One of the difficulties that the American troops had was that Viet Cong could always retreat into Cambodia. Politically we couldn't follow them in, so they'd come out and do their mischiefs, do their attacks, go back into Cambodia, and we had to stop.

Nixon decided that that wasn't going to happen anymore, and for a month declare there was this Cambodian incursion where they could wear, the American troops could follow them in. I found the unit the night before the announcement that was going in, so I linked up with them, and actually went into Cambodia that night with American troops. It turns out that Viet Cong had found out too, so they disappeared. There was nobody there. We went in looking, there was nobody there.

But it was probably more frightening than operating in Vietnam because it was our new territory, nobody really knew it, nobody knew where the enemy was, and for really a month, that entire month the American military was in Cambodia trying to find the Viet Cong and never really did. I was with them for most of the month, I'd come out and file and then go back in again. But that was probably a big story for me, the incursion.

- Speaker 1: That's where it was almost turning into, I'll say a super highway, but I've heard that phrase used, it was that enormous amount of men, goods, material coming down that road, and it went right through those two countries.
- Lou: That's right. The incursion also ruined Cambodia. It destabilized the government, and it gave the Khmer Rouge the impetus to basically take over the country. Cambodia before the incursion was, because I was there a couple of times, it was a beautiful, wonderful gentle country, Phnom Penh was a lovely city with a wide terrace that looked like, almost looked like Paris with broad trees on a very, very wide street. Grand Hotel was a grand hotel, but once the incursion happened and the war was imported into Cambodia, Khmer Rouge took over immediately, and of course there was the bloodbath that we all heard about.
- Speaker 1: Now at that time, when that, I remember because I was a young person in college then, that there was all kinds of ...
- Lou: [That 00:30:38] happened the day that we went in, it was May 1st of '70 is the day that we went into [Canada 00:30:47], the incursion began. Actually I ended up coming back to the United States here later and going to the first anniversary of the Kent State massacre, which was also interesting.
- Speaker 1: You knew that the country was embroiled.
- Lou: Absolutely.
- Speaker 1: In this, and troops all [crosstalk 00:31:09].
- Lou: The troops were upset. Here they were sacrificing their lives, fighting, being shot at, and at the same time feeling that they were getting absolutely no support from back home and from their buddies who they went to school with, and whom they were writing to. Here were their friends, who were protesting what they were doing over, and what they were doing there. It was a very, very, very difficult situation for the young guys.
- Speaker 1: Then the draft really had to start coming into replace all those guys that were leaving, and consequently you had a lot of people there who didn't want to be there. If they were going to be there, they were going to use drugs to forget about the [problem 00:32:00]. Did you see a lot of this stuff [inaudible 00:32:04] one the transformation of the unit really happened in the [crosstalk 00:32:08]?

Lou: There was a lot of drugs, there was a tremendous amount of marijuana, and there was this one story that we didn't do but CBS did it of a bunch of guys. What the guys would do was after their battle they would use, actually take their weapons and use the barrels of their rifles to smoke pot. I remember CBS did the story and it created a tremendous amount of controversy back home, but there was a tremendous amount of marijuana, and a lot of drinking too, a lot of booze.

These guys were under a lot of pressure, remember they were in danger 24 hours a day because you never know. The one thing about the Vietnam was you never knew when you're going to be attacked. In most parts of the country it was a defensive war, and it's a very difficult war to fight because you never know when you're going to be, when it is going to be attacked, when mortar is coming in, and after awhile you snap.

Tremendous amount of marijuana. The guys were thinking about, I'm here for a year, I don't want to be here, and I want to get out of here. All they were doing was count the number of days they had left until they could go home. As I say, it was very dangerous, and it was also very uncomfortable. The climate was lousy, either was raining, there were bugs and you just wanted to leave.

Speaker 1: Did a certain war correspondent start counting the days down?

Lou: I counted the days from the time I got on the plane to go over. Of course, the correspondents had it a lot better than the troops because as I said, after we finished our story, we could go back to Saigon, and I went to, I got into my comfortable air-conditioned hotel room with a nice bar down in the lower level and a good, good French restaurants all over Saigon.

I remember [Ramencho's 00:34:39] Restaurant was just fantastic. We could get away, we could come back home and relax for a couple of days. The troops couldn't do that. They were stuck [inaudible 00:34:51] in tents, and on cots for a whole year, for a whole year. It's very, very difficult, very difficult war. They were also in country R&Rs, it wasn't ... There was China beach, which was out in Da Nang, which was beautiful. There was time off but ...

Speaker 1: Did you get out of the country?

Lou: Oh yeah. NBC had a policy where we worked 24/7 when we were there. Every 10 weeks, every two months we got 10 weeks off. Is that right? Every two months ...

Let me start over here. NBC had a policy where we worked 24/7, so every 10 weeks we ...

Speaker 1: That makes two and a half months.

Lou: Every two months we got 10 days off. Every two months we got 10 days off, and they would give us a first-class ticket to Hong Kong, which we could use to go to Hong Kong or go anywhere. I used it to go all over the Far East, and the year that I was in Vietnam, I did Bangkok, Singapore, Nepal, I went to Australia for Christmas, I went to Israel for New Year's, and all on NBC's money.

There was actually a Vietnamese law that said if you stayed in the country, if a foreigner stayed in the country more than two months he'd have to pay Vietnamese taxes, which were astronomical. We had to leave the country every two months, and we did that. Of course, you are always thinking about coming back, always thinking about getting back into that same situation. But it was a job and we did it and it was okay, it was okay.

One thing, the one incident that stands out in my mind was we had covered some of a major battle in the Delta, and it was all over and we were coming home, and I had gotten a ride on a armored vehicle on a tank, and we were driving through the battlefield, through where all this had happened. All of the, there must've been three or four dozen dead Viet Cong. They were just laying there in the field rotting, and we were driving through, that's awful, terrible.

Speaker 1: You don't have too many, you don't have, you never had any real nightmares though. You [crosstalk 00:37:53].

Lou: I'm too insensitive. Also I think as a correspondent, you are detached. You are certainly, you are an observer, you are watching this from a distance, a close distance but you are watching it from a distance, but you are detached, and you are also very, very busy making sure that you are getting your facts and information correct. It's different than being a combat.

Speaker 1: A little more credibility.

Lou: With?

Speaker 1: The troops that you were covering and writing about, that you were one of them.

Lou: I hope so. I don't know whether I ever mentioned it. It had been 10 years since I got out of the military. The military, the advisors, the MACV certainly knew that I was ex-military, but once I got out on the field I'm not sure whether I ever, no. In fact we were told not to, but there were a couple of guys that carried the side arm just for protection. I don't know of anybody that ever used it, but there were several guys that had, that had weapons.

Speaker 1: I do know that story, we were soldiers once in [inaudible 00:39:39]. They actually gave them a medal. I didn't even know they'd give up a medal to a civilian but they did. Did you ever hear about that on your comrades about getting involved in the action?

Lou: You are there with these guys, and if somebody next to you is hurt or injured you help them. You just do that. It happened often. It happened often.

Speaker 1: Did it ever happen to you?

Lou: No. It certainly changed the way I look at life. It changed my career, definitely it was life altering. I don't know how you'd describe going through a year of war. It was, here I was a young kid out of New York with no experience at all, and suddenly I'm thrust into the middle of this conflict. I'm looking around, I'm seeing people killed and I'm seeing people injured, I'm seeing people named and it's absolutely life-changing. It was for me too because I was threatened, I was scared, and this thing went on for a year. It changed me completely.

Speaker 1: Did they asked you if you'd like to go back?

Lou: I went back, when I got out of Vietnam they did give me a contract, and I stayed with NBC. Three months later they called me and they wanted me to go back to Vietnam to cover the elections, the election of President, the reelection of President too. They basically told me that I would not be doing any combat, that I'd be doing political reporting. But I went back for three months, and of course their promise was completely, didn't mean anything. As soon as I got there we went back into the regular routine of going out and covering the combat. I went back twice.

Then after that I went to Israel and covered the war there. I was in Israel for three months covering the war. I for quite a bit of time when I was with NBC, I was a war correspondent for them. The Vietnamization had occurred, there are a

lot less American troops, the marines were basically gone at that point, and Saigon was a lot more dangerous.

Saigon, the first time I was there Saigon was basically a haven, and it was, you are pretty comfortable there. The second time I went back, you had to be very, very careful in Saigon also as they were starting to wind down and we were getting closer to leaving completely. [inaudible 00:43:18] coming when I was there. The embassy was a lot more protected. At nights, you didn't want to be out on the street at night anymore in Saigon. You could see that it was crumbling.

Speaker 1: That was no surprise to you when that country collapsed.

Lou: I didn't expect it to happen the way it happened. I don't think anybody did, but I wasn't surprised that Viet Cong took over and the whole thing collapsed the way it did, very, very, very quickly. I stayed with NBC for five years, and then I met my wife, we got engaged and I decided that I didn't want to do this anymore. I was traveling all over the country and all over the world for NBC, and I wanted to stay home. We left NBC, got a local job in Atlanta, I was in Atlanta for seven years and then came here. It was a very gradual thing, and I ended up sitting here in this chair talking to you.

Speaker 1: But I know you like to travel, [crosstalk 00:44:37].

Lou: I do, I do. I don't know, it was quite a trip, the whole thing starting with his job at NBC. It was all very good after that.

Speaker 1: It's been quite a ride.

Lou: It's been quite a ride. It's really been quite a ride.

Speaker 1: I want to thank you for sharing your story.

Lou: I hope this is okay.

Speaker 1: Oh, it's great. You gave me lot of great stuff, so thank you so much and thank you for what you did over there. I mean bringing that story back was ever so important because it, it set new standards for how wars are covered, and even today [crosstalk 00:45:40].

Lou: We learned a lot as we went along as I say, I had no experience at all. I was a reporter, I had reporting experience but I certainly had no combat experience or anything like that except for Columbia University. It was a tremendous learning experience, and people keep asking me if I would do it again, and I keep telling them I don't know, but I'm glad I did, I'm glad I did what I did.

Speaker 1: Thank you again for coming up here. That's great.